

EDMUND McWILLIAMS

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is December 1, 2005. This is an interview with Edward McWilliams.

MCWILLIAMS: Edmund, actually.

Q: Edmund. Edmund McWilliams. M-C-W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S. And you go by Ed or?

MCWILLIAMS: Ed's fine.

Q: Ed. And this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies. And I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Ed, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

MCWILLIAMS: I was born February 18, 1947 in Providence, Rhode Island.

Q: Okay. Now, tell me something about, let's talk about your family on your, let's do the father's side.

MCWILLIAMS: My father-

Q: And back as far as, you know, give an idea where they all came from.

MCWILLIAMS: Alright. Old Irish immigrant stock. Came over in the late 1800s. My dad had been a mill worker all his life and at the age-

Q: How about your grandfather? Do you know?

MCWILLIAMS: My grandfather was a mill worker also, textile mills in New England.

Q: And both were textiles?

MCWILLIAMS: That's right. My grandfather died quite early of a heart attack. I never met him, died in the '30s. My father had a heart attack at the age of 47 and was what they call a heart cripple for the rest of his life, so.

Q: Would you put this to mill work in the-?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it was, I think to some extent mill work. And we were not wealthy. He worked very hard, worked double jobs and so on to keep us going. And in those days diet was not very good but also genetics on his side were not good; his father had died at 54 of a heart condition. But as a result my mother had to go back to work in her middle 50s. And so it was a very good family. I had a twin brother and we're both fairly academically oriented, principally because of my father, who although he only went as far as the eighth grade was very well read and very interested in public affairs and current affairs. He had volunteered to serve in World War II quite late in life (he was 33) and I think that gave him a great interest in the world and he tried to convey that to us, both my brother and I, and I think as a consequence I became very interested in international affairs.

Q: Well, where did your father serve, do you know?

MCWILLIAMS: He was in what they called the China-Burma-India Theatre.

Q: Oh yes.

MCWILLIAMS: And spent a lot of time in India but also was in bombing missions into China, over Burma and so on. Came back with a Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross.

Q: Oh boy. That was a very difficult thing, flying over the hump.

MCWILLIAMS: Exactly, flying the hump, that's right.

Q: Oh yes, very much so, that was- What about your mother and her side of the family?



MCWILLIAMS: She was old Yankee stock. The family actually, on her side, goes back to Plymouth Rock and the Pilgrims through several lines. But basically what they used to call Swamp Yankee, which is the old New England Yankee farmers and it was an unusual arrangement because my father's side, of course, is very Catholic, being Irish, and my mother's side is very Protestant and in neither family had ever, there had never been an inter-religious marriage so that was a bit of a problem because there was a question as to whether my brother would be raised Catholic or Protestant and it created some family tensions but.

Q: Well, you were twins, couldn't they compromise?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that would have been one way to approach it, I suppose, but in any event that was- it was interesting because I grew up in a, very much a Catholic neighborhood, a French Catholic, again, the old mill towns, textile mills. I worked in the textile mills myself between college, in my high school summers and then early college years.

Q: It's hard to think of doing work in textile mills in the modern context because-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, it's all gone, it's all gone.

Q: They've all moved south.

MCWILLIAMS: That's right. Or to China.

Q: Or to China or stuff like that.

Well, what, you were born and where did you live?

MCWILLIAMS: I lived in rural Rhode Island, up in the, as they used to say, the sticks, up in the corner of Rhode Island between Connecticut and Massachusetts on essentially old farmland but, as I say, most of the village had become, this is the village of Mohegan, had become a textile village and in the late 19th, early 20th centuries a lot of the French Canadians had moved into that area, it had previously been Yankee predominantly but it was a very French Canadian neighborhood to the extent that some of the older people could not speak English and you'd go down the sidewalks and so on and people would be speaking French, not English. It was quite interesting.



Q: Did you grow up there?

MCWILLIAMS: I grew up there and then went off to school. And then once I had gone to school I continued to consider that my home. Indeed, I still vote back in Rhode Island but basically only visits and holidays and so on.

Q: Well, let's talk about the town. What was it like growing up as a kid, this being the '40s and '50s?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it was something of a rural town. The mills were dying and it was essentially a country town. Most of my classmates in high school and of course in grammar school came very much from the same background I came from. Their parents would have worked in the mills and indeed in the '50s were still working in the mills. Every single village in the town had a major mill in it; indeed the villages were built around these mills and that was the culture, really, it was very much a mill culture.

Q: How about as a kid? Particularly interested as a small kid; what was it like?

MCWILLIAMS: It was a good childhood. The school was just about a mile from the house. We had to walk to school in those days. There was a lot of open land around the house. We used to play out in the woods quite a bit. Because it was a fairly sparsely populated area you never really got into the team sports, baseball and football, because you never could get enough kids together although in school I did play, in grammar school and in latter years I did play some football. But I just kind of enjoyed the woods and with playmates and so on.

Q: How about school? How did you find school?

MCWILLIAMS: I went to a very old-fashioned primary school. We had three grades per room and then finally two grades per room. Strict old teachers. In my last two years of grammar school I had a Greek fellow who was extremely interested in international affairs and philosophy and history and he showed a lot of interest in both my brother and I because of our own interest in international affairs and I think he, a fellow named Mr. Steve, and my father were great influences on both of us, my brother and I, in terms of developing our interest in politics and international affairs.

Q: How did three classes in a room work?



MCWILLIAMS: I marvel at the teachers of those days because this entailed teaching probably 50 or 60 students and three different grades. Basically if you, for example, in the first, second or third grade, the teacher would be, would give a project to the first grade, start working with the second grade and shift to the third grade but basically would have to keep all three grades working at the same time while she was actually giving her focus only to one. And when you think about it in retrospect that was quite a task, keeping discipline and, of course, advancing us as both individuals and as classes.

Q: You mentioned your father was very interesting. Where did your family fall politically at that time?

MCWILLIAMS: My father, interestingly, my father was very much a Franklin D. Roosevelt Democrat. My mother tended to be more Republican and indeed her stock, the Yankee family, was very much Republican, but over the years I think she began to move towards my father's thinking on a lot of issues. I say unfortunately, I tended to go in the opposite direction. I tended to go in the opposite direction. I became sort of a Goldwater conservative, I think much to his regret, and we had quite a few discussions that were not, were not as I would like to have had them in retrospect. But through much of my youth and then into my career I was pretty much a conservative. I've moved significantly now to a different perspective.

Q: How about your brother?

MCWILLIAMS: My brother was also more conservative oriented than was my father and indeed he went to Brown University where he chaired the Brown Young Republicans but I think even then and certainly subsequently he moved much more toward what my father's position would have been. I would say more of a progressive Democrat position.

Q: Religion?

MCWILLIAMS: Religion wasn't a factor in our life until we became adults, neither my brother nor I. Because my mother and father came from different religious backgrounds we did not attend church or any kind, other than at weddings and funerals, although we were taught the fundamentals of Christianity, the Lord's Prayer and so on, but we were very carefully not a religious family. I can remember that being a bit of a problem in the village because we were not of the faith of our father or the faith of the village and that was, that posed certain problems.

Q: I would imagine, knowing New England at that time, the priest is a pretty powerful figure.



MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, oh yes.

Q: And in a French Catholic place, this is the time when the French Canadians were very much under the thumb of the Church and trained that way, that you would have, people would be sort of shunning you on the street.

MCWILLIAMS: There was a little ostracism. Although I think my father, because of his personality, notwithstanding the fact that some of the strict, very strict families I think sort of put us, shunned us to some extent, my father was, especially before he became ill, was very active in the fire department and so on, had a very large circle of friends. So I think that notwithstanding some religious differences he remained very popular. And my mother also had a very large circle of friends. So it's hard to explain but I think to some extent my brother and I felt that. I know some families would not allow their children to play with us. And I recall, for example, in grammar school on Wednesday afternoons the entire school would decamp up to the church for catechism, leaving my brother and I and one or two others in the school and we used to look forward to it because, of course, the teacher would basically give us free time.

Q: Yes. Well, you say your father was quite a reader. Were you a reader?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Again, I was interested in current affairs. Time magazine, we always got Time magazine at the house, I recall, and would read that very carefully, and the newspapers, of course, were always in the house.

Q: What about- did Rhode Island politics intrude much?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, to some extent. Even as a youth I'm afraid I was a bit of a rebel from my father's perspective because I, very early on, grafted on to Republican politics. John Chaffee ran for governor in 1960, later to become a very famous and very effective senator and I as a kid campaigned for him, actually putting up bumper stickers and so on around the town. So again, I think much to the chagrin of my father, although John Chaffee was the kind of politician who had a very bipartisan appeal so I don't think my father not too upset.

Q: Well he grew up in that wonderful set up East Coast-

MCWILLIAMS: Liberal Republicans, yes.

Q: Liberal Republicans like Javits and others.



MCWILLIAMS: A Rockefeller Republican.

Q: Made such a difference, which is unfortunately a time gone by now.

MCWILLIAMS: My father had tremendous feeling against Nixon, even in the 1960 election, but I think for that reason was not terribly put off by the Javits and the Chaffees and so on, who were obviously progressive.

Q: What about, you were about 13 when Nixon-Kennedy thing came. How did that hit you, because Kennedy stirred up Dickie the New Englander but also Catholic and seemed to be a lot younger but really about the same age as Nixon?

MCWILLIAMS: Interesting, you know. No, I can remember that very distinctly. And I think during that period I became terribly enamored of Kennedy, notwithstanding my work for some Republicans in 1960. But that's why the shock of his killing was a tremendous impact, as obviously all over New England, all over America but particularly in my family, particularly for me.

Q: What about Claiborne Pell? Did he come up at all?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Because I've interviewed him as a former Foreign Service officer.

MCWILLIAMS: That's right, that's right. Yes, he was, as you know, he's a popular politician in Rhode Island. I don't think he had the same charm or appeal that Chaffee had. He had respect, I would say. He was an old Yankee like Chaffee. I interned for him briefly in Washington in 1968. It afforded me an opportunity to witness and participate in the Poor People's March that Spring, immediately after the murder of Dr. King.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: And oddly enough these two old Yankees did very well. At that same time we also had another senator, John O. Pastore, who was a remarkable figure in his own right, and I can remember liking him very well.

Q: Where did Green come from?

MCWILLIAMS: Theodore Francis Green he, of course, by the time I was aware of what politics, I was watching politics, he was a very old man.

Q: Yes well, he was-

MCWILLIAMS: Into his 90s before he left the senate. Still playing tennis, of course. But again, another old Yankee. It's interesting.

Q: Yes, yes, I mean, these were- Rhode Island really, for this poor little Rhode Island we used to say-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: But really turned out a remarkable set of-

MCWILLIAMS: Well, another one whose name I've mentioned was John E. Fogarty, who was actually friend of my mother. Rather, not directly but she knew of him because he came from our area up in northern Rhode Island, an old Irishman, a very, very well liked congressman.

Q: Did foreign affairs, was it a subject of interest to you as a young child?

MCWILLIAMS: Very much so. As I mentioned earlier, this seventh and eighth grade teacher that I had, he would have taught two grades, of course, at the same time, pushed both my brother and I towards and interest in Foreign Affairs. And I can remember in 1960, well, my eighth grade, I was asked to prepare a career folder. We all were supposed to prepare folders on what we wanted to do with our lives. This was his initiative. And mine was diplomatic service, foreign service, at 13 years old. So pretty early on I was interested in international affairs.

Q: Well, do you recall how diplomacy came across your radar?

MCWILLIAMS: I think strictly following current events, following the newspaper articles. And you know, as a kid, being encouraged by someone for whom you have respect, both my father and this one teacher, and sort of the perks, the rewards of debating and discussing with adults issues that other people really didn't pay much attention to, it had a certain appeal. I like geography, I like map study very much, which sort of, I think spurred that interest for it as well.



Q: Did you find this sort of separated you from sort of the run of the group?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. There wasn't, other than my brother there weren't many other students, even in high school that paid much attention to these issues. But in some ways that made it all the more interesting because you could have these discussions with adults that were serious.

Q: High school, where'd you go to high school?

MCWILLIAMS: In the town, local Burrillville High School. We had- it's a very small school. I think 400 and some students in it. Very much a sports school and I didn't play sports in high school but I certainly enjoyed, cheered for the teams and so on. But there again it was a rural country high school but I thought for the most part some very good, very memorable teachers. Just went to my, actually my, gosh, 40th reunion this past summer and a few of the teachers actually still around and we had a chance to talk with them and they're still remarkable people.

Q: Well did, what sort of things were you doing in high school? First place, what studies grabbed you and what didn't?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, in those days you really couldn't take special courses, college courses so you took them all. But I liked history. I liked English to some extent, hated math, was terrible at it. My brother was a real intellectual and was regarded as such. He was a National Merit Scholarship finalist and invariably did very well. And although I did not work as hard as he did I tended to score quite highly on all the aptitude tests and so on. But my brother actually was president of his high school senior class besides being an intellectual which is a little bit unusual. But I was not particularly assiduous. I didn't care for languages because it involved too much work and math took too much work so I gravitated only to those subjects that I felt I really enjoyed which were history and so on.

Q: Were you and your brother competitors a lot or not?

MCWILLIAMS: Not terribly. In fact I think he was kind of a crutch for me because I often would not be doing the homework and come up to him at the last minute and he'd obviously finished his and I'd sort of crib from him. So he was kind of a support for me through much of high school.

Q: Well, while you were in high school, I take it your mother had not gone to college, had she or?



MCWILLIAMS: No, no.

Q: But were you, were your family pointing you, or your father was dead by this time?

MCWILLIAMS: No, no, no. My father didn't die until 1985 and my mother in '87. Yeah, no both my mother and father and an aunt who lived with us, a crippled aunt who lived with us very much wanted to see both my brother and I headed to college. So there was a lot of encouragement for us to be serious about our schoolwork. I don't think with my brother's case it was all that necessary because he was but I did need encouragement.

Q: Did- so where were you pointed after college?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, in those days, I mean, money was a big factor, of course. And I looked at several colleges and basically took the easy course. I went to the University of Rhode Island. I had made enough money working in the mills in the summers to pretty much carry me into that; it wasn't a very high tuition in those days for state students. My brother, on the other hand, qualified and received scholarship assistance for Brown University, which of course is very prestigious and a great success for him and he graduated in '69 as I graduated from URI in '69.

Q: What was the University of Rhode Island like in those days?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it was an engineering school and it was a party school but it also, of course, was caught up in the politics of the late '60s. And that's where I really became politically active, very much on the conservative side. There was a group called The Young Americans for Freedom, which was beyond the Republicans and I was the chapter chairman there for a couple of years and very much pro Vietnam War, very much- well, we were ambivalent about Johnson because of course, although a progressive Democrat he nonetheless supported the war and we were essentially oriented toward support for the war.

Q: What was happening on the campus about the Vietnam War?



MCWILLIAMS: There were tremendous demonstrations there too, as everywhere else. And I would be with those sort of counter demonstrators, usually just in the tens as opposed to hundreds or even thousands on the other side but developed a good dialogue with the leadership of the left. And we would have debates and so on and there was actually some friendship, I think, between myself and some of the leaders of the left. I remember at one point in my senior year the leaders of the left and myself got together and formed a group that was intended to help defeat racism on campus and notwithstanding my own conservative views I was very moved by Martin Luther King in those days and worked on racism issues with the left and I think fairly successful raising scholarship funds and so on.

Q: Was there- the civil rights thing was going on at the same time, pre-dating certain of\_ the Vietnam concerns of students. How was that impacting where you were?

MCWILLIAMS: Quite significantly although nowhere near the significance and the interest, of course, as the war, the Vietnam War. Now, this is talking about '66, '67, '68 and so on, although I can recall Martin Luther King came to campus to speak and very, I can remember his, I can't remember the speech but I remember being terribly impressed that he spoke so eloquently without notes and so passionately. He had tremendous influence on the campus and I think that one event sparked or resparked some of my interest in the civil rights issues. My father, of course, had always been very, very supportive on the civil rights front of efforts.

Q: I went to a school in, I went to Boston University for my Master's, '55- '54-'56, and I was, I hadn't really realized it but there seemed to be a real divide between Catholics and Protestants and having been, with the name Kennedy and being Protestant and a very good Protestant or anything, you know, I was sort of astounded at these divisions in Boston. But also, in New England, this divide between the French Canadians and others. They were sort of looked upon, down upon. Did you see that where you were or not?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I mean, the point was that, in the Blackstone Valley, which Burrillville, my town is part of, they predominated. They were clearly the majority. So that in a sense there was no discrimination against them but I have to admit that I think that, I personally felt a little resentment. It may have been over the fact that I think that they resented the fact that my brother and I were not practicing Catholics and not even French. So I mean, there was a little bit of resentment on my own part.

Q: You think you felt discriminated.

MCWILLIAMS: I guess. And I sort of reflected that. Although in retrospect my very best friends, of course, even today, are people that I, from that period, who are French Canadians.



Q: Yes. You graduated in '69?

MCWILLIAMS: Right.

Q: Now that would have put you right eligible for the draft, wouldn't it?

MCWILLIAMS: Right. It was a difficult thing for me because I had been vociferous in support of the war and if you remember, they had a draft lottery. I guess it started in '68 or '69 but in any event my number came out 292, which made me safe. And I welcomed that but on the other hand I sort of felt a little bit of chagrin but not so much that I didn't go off and start my Master's program at Ohio University in Southeast Asian studies. And there, again, I became active in pro-war activities but after the first semester simply couldn't live with the shame of being pro-war and enjoying a deferment. So I left school and volunteered for the army with the proviso that they would give me Vietnamese language training so that I would definitely get to Vietnam and I did.

Q: So this is- why did you pick Ohio to go to?

MCWILLIAMS: I was very interested in Southeast Asia principally because of my interest in Vietnam and they had a program, a Southeast Asian program specifically at Ohio, although it focused principally on Malaysia, Indonesia and Burma. They nonetheless obviously dealt with Indochina which is my interest. Oddly enough at the end of my career I became much more interested in Indonesia but that was the way it worked.

Q: So you went into the army when?

MCWILLIAMS: Well I left school in December of '69 and then I worked in the mills for eight months to build up some cash because I was pretty much out of money and then in August of 1970 I enlisted, again with a proviso that I be given Vietnamese language training, which I had. I had 47 weeks at- in El Paso area, Fort Bliss, Biggs Field. And after the 47 weeks, in January of '72 I went to Vietnam.

Q: By August of '70 when you came in, we were really drawing down at that time.



MCWILLIAMS: Well absolutely. Well, not so much in '70 but certainly by '72 when I finally got there in January '72. The American combat role was pretty much over but we were assigned as support for ARVN units; I was in Intelligence. So we did get into the field quite a bit, working behind ARVN units, which is ironically sort of the way it all started, if you remember, '64-'65.

Q: By the way, how did you find Vietnamese as a language?

MCWILLIAMS: Not easy. I've never liked languages and I think of all the languages I've tackled Vietnamese was by far the hardest. And again, continuing from college and high school days I wasn't a very good student. I was lazy. But it was a hard language for me, I thought.

Q: Well then, when you went to Vietnam you were assigned to ARVN, which is the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam.

MCWILLIAMS: No, I was actually, I was assigned to MACV, and we were given responsibility essentially for advising and assisting ARVN at the strategic level which kept us in Saigon, Bien Hoa and then occasionally at tactical level, which put us out into the field.

Q: So you want to talk about what you were up to?

MCWILLIAMS: Basically I spent 11 months there in Saigon, as I say, fairly boring strategic level intelligence. I'm not sure that the reporting was of any significance, frankly. When we got to the field I was in Tay Ninh for awhile and at various places in the Delta or four corps as it was known. There it was more interesting because you were producing battle intelligence; that is, intelligence that would be very fresh and have some impact on the battle scene, actually, so that was a bit more interesting.

Q: While you were there, there was a big North Vietnamese offensive around that time, wasn't there?



MCWILLIAMS: The major operation that I recall was an Easter offensive and that was when I was sent out to a place called Tay Ninh West, which is right on the Cambodian border. And I don't remember a great deal of that. I remember we were hit even at night, which surprised me because I thought the fighting would be all in the daytime but when I- I had only been in country about a month so I didn't have much of a sense of what all of that was going to be about. But that was the only major operation that I can recall in retrospect. I think the biggest impact for me was the cultural impact. It was the first time overseas, a very interesting environment and I think pretty much sealed in me that I wanted to get into the Foreign Service. I didn't want to stay in the military, there was too much that I didn't like about the military.

Q: Did you have any contact with our embassy or our consulate general?

MCWILLIAMS: No, although interestingly in the summer of '72 I was sent to Cambodia. As you know in those days it was illegal to have forces in Cambodia but I was one of, I think a couple of hundred who were attached to the DAO (Defense Attaché's Office) at embassy Phnom Penh, which was obviously a subterfuge because we weren't really with the DAT's office, we basically did intelligence work and I spent about a month there, at the embassy, in and out of the embassy.

Q: What was, not so much your impression but also your impression but you were in an intelligence unit dealing with the ARVN. What was the, sort of, on the, your colleagues who were dealing with them, what was the impression of their abilities?

MCWILLIAMS: It's kind of hard for me to make an assessment of that. I was close personally to some of them because although I allegedly had Vietnamese I used- I relied on translators quite a bit, interpreters. I think I had some affection for them. I had some respect for them, clearly. I had some problems with them. I was an interrogator in terms of my MOS and I had it drilled into me in school, in Huachuca, Fort Huachuca in Arizona, you know, you don't torture, you don't brutalize prisoners. And particularly when I was in the field I saw things that I didn't like and I remember that bothered me a bit. I reported it up and I was not happy with the response from- on the American channel, the notion being well that's not our problem. If there were American troops doing this it would be one thing but these are Vietnamese. So, I mean, even then I felt that something was wrong there. But not excessive brutality but some. But I don't really have a strong reaction to that.

Q: Yes. I mean, was there within the body military that you were working with, I'm talking about the American military, a feeling that the- Arvin was going to be able to take care of the problem or was the feeling that, you know-



MCWILLIAMS: I don't think at my level, again, I was a grunt. Well, a grunt. I was enlisted, I wasn't an officer. I don't think at my level that question ever really came up. I think there was, because we'd been there so long there was a sense that this would just go on. There was no sense that ARVN might actually lose this or we might lose it. I think there was just a sense well this is just- there was no political sense, you know, could they lose or might we lose. It just wasn't there. It was just sort of a thing, you do your bit and you'd go home. And then it would just continue on without you.

Q: Did you have any contacts with Vietnamese? I'm thinking about Vietnamese women and all that? Very attractive people.

MCWILLIAMS: Sure. Very intelligent, very charming. Had good friends, friends that I worked with. Got to know the Tudu Street and so on, the bar girls a little bit but no great friendships or anything. But I remember subsequent to that, my first real assignment in the Foreign Service was at Camp Pendleton, which was where the refugee program was operating in California and I can remember standing in the line working to register refugees as they came in and in came a clutch of my old workers, my old compatriots and it was stunning, hadn't expected that, but they had been evacuated, of course, because they had worked very close with the U.S. military. And I remember being struck at that time how different they seemed. It was almost impossible to strike up the old conversations. I mean, they just lost everything and I don't think the loss of Vietnam had really impacted me until that time, until I saw my old friends who were absolutely changed people by virtue of everything that they had lost.

Q: Well, how long were you in the army?

MCWILLIAMS: Three years.

Q: What did you do after your tour in Vietnam?

MCWILLIAMS: I went back to Ohio University and finished my Master's program and then applied desperately for a job. Interviewed with DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, I think CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and then with State, of course. And I had actually in '74 I had passed the written exam and then the oral exam.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions on the oral exam?



MCWILLIAMS: I do. I should say I had actually tried out for the Foreign Service and passed the written and failed the oral back in '69, I guess, I think just after I left university. But I can remember one question and oddly enough I think it was one that sealed it for me. I'm not sure we need all this but going up to Boston to take the test I was reading Time magazine and there was a long debate about how America should deal with those young men, mostly, who had fled to Canada to avoid the draft. And I said boy, what if they ask me a question like that? So I had just to sort of keep my mind busy worked up in my own mind how I would deal with that question and oddly enough that question came up. You're an old Vietnam vet, you're not old, you're a Vietnam veteran, America is facing this problem of what to do with the Vietnam veterans who were fled to- Vietnam people- excuse me, Vietnam era young men who fled to Canada to avoid the draft, what do you do? How should America react to these people? And I was able to give a fairly well composed answer because, frankly, I was just lucky enough to have thought about it. And anyway, they told me subsequently that that answer was important.

Q: Well, did- while you were getting your Master's degree, what, was it in history or?

MCWILLIAMS: The Master's was in Southeast Asian history with a minor in journalism.

Q: Did you find when you came back that being a Vietnam vet there- people were looking at you in the academic world with different eyes or not or?

MCWILLIAMS: No, I can't say I felt too much of that although I remember one incident, and this was when I was still in training, I believe it would have been just before I went over. I had, it was the Christmas, it was like Christmas of '71, I was hitchhiking home, that's across the country from, I guess Fort Huachuca in Arizona and got picked up by a van full of hippies, basically. And they knew I was a soldier and everything was fine and frankly had a good long ride, discussion and so on. And then shortly before we reached New York City I told them what I was going to be doing when I went to Vietnam, an interrogator, and that sort of ended the discussion right there, it was the last half-hour or 45 minutes was a very cold ride. And I remember that very distinctly, not so much, indeed I think there was sympathy that I was going to Vietnam but I think other than that no, I never felt the ostracism that I think a lot of my colleagues felt coming back. And again, to be fair, I did not suffer anywhere near the kind of problems that a lot of my Vietnam vet colleagues did who were in combat day after day after day. I saw very little of that. And came back basically unharmed from that experience. But I know I have some friends now who still experience problems related to that at that period. And I can't really say that I paid the kind of price that a lot of my people of my generation paid.



Q: Well, when you came back, I mean, here you at least went and saw the elephant and came back and this had been part of your, you might say your belief that what we were doing in Vietnam was right, we should be there. Did your experience there by the time you left have any effect on you?

MCWILLIAMS: No to be honest. I continued to believe the war was right and indeed in '75 was aghast that the U.S. appeared to be pulling away from the South Vietnamese government as it did and very angry because I think I still was very much of the belief that that was a right war, that we should have continued to support the South Vietnamese. And this view continued right through my career right up until around the end of the Cold War when I began to think differently.

Q: Yes. Well, I have to say I parallel you. I was not a conservative but on that I felt that we were stopping something. I'm not completely convinced we didn't stop something. I mean, you know, the old domino theory, I don't think was, I mean, it's been pooh poohed and discredited but there was something going on there that if we had not been there things, other things would have happened in Indonesia and other places.

MCWILLIAMS: There's one analysis that suggests that we bought time for the rest of Southeast Asia. I think at a minimum you could make a case for that. On the other hand, you mention Indonesia, we supported some pretty awful dictatorships and that's also part of the legacy of the Cold War.

Q: Well then, you took the Foreign Service exam, passed it, then what happened?

MCWILLIAMS: Then, as you remember as it is still today, there's a long period in which the investigation has to be conducted and they have to put you on a list and so. So I faced without a whole lot of money, I obviously saved some money from the army but faced a long period of uncertainty so I was given an offer of a job by DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] and I've always felt a little bit shabby about this, I took it with the full realization that I was in fact waiting for the position at State that I really wanted. Right here at Arlington Hall where we're sitting actually.

Q: We're sitting here now.

MCWILLIAMS: And I took it and I must say with the full knowledge that if the Foreign Service came through with an offer I was going to take that right away. But got oriented to Washington for six months or so and got some fairly decent training from DIA although I must say what little work I did in the institution did not leave me with the thought that I wanted to remain in the Pentagon. And then in November got word that I was on the list and that I would be joining the Foreign Service in January and was ecstatic.



Q: So you came in when?

MCWILLIAMS: January '75.

Q: '75. What was basic officer, your A100 course like? I mean the composition of it, your feeling about it?

MCWILLIAMS: Well I mean, at that time, as I said, I was extremely high on the whole concept of joining the Foreign Service, joining the State Department. I've remained friends with many in my class. It was a very large class and a very exciting time. But of course at that time we were on the verge of losing South Vietnam. I remember my assignment coming out of the A100 class was the consulate in Nha Trang. The notion that I could speak some Vietnamese had led them to put me in Nha Trang. And I can remember my classmates' sympathizing with me that I was going to be going to Nha Trang. And it's sort of ironic that in the first three or four assignments maintaining contact with some of my friends they always were concerned that I was always taking the shittiest assignments. But I gravitated to that kind of rough, tough stuff. But in point of the fact Nha Trang collapsed and it fell to the North Vietnamese weeks before I was to go there so I was left without an assignment which pulled me into this- the Indochina refugee program. I was sent to Camp Pendleton to deal with the refugee influx, again reflecting the fact that I had some Vietnamese language ability. So my first six months with the Foreign Service was sort of in an unusual assignment, that is, the refugee program under Nick Thorn, kind of a legendary figure.

Q: He took my house in Saigon.

MCWILLIAMS: Is that right? Did he just steal it? Knowing Nick ....

Q: No, no. He took my maid or whatever cook, where I lived. I was consul general in Saigon in '69 through '70, 18 months, and when I left he took it.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Nick, as you probably remember, was a pretty famous guy, lot of, very charismatic fellow and to have him as my first boss and as a pretty direct relationship I felt blessed and I still do from that.

Q: Well could you talk about, you mentioned one thing of your impressions but also what we were doing...



MCWILLIAMS: New York area. New Orleans took a lot. Texas coast. Iowa had a very good program, they actually drew people there. But it was an effort essentially to work very closely with American NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) who were critical to getting sponsorships for these individual families as they came through. At Pendleton it was particularly interesting because we were also taking in Cambodians and although much fewer, I think only about seven or eight thousand, it was interesting culturally to basically work both sides because the camps were quite distinctly different but it was a very interesting, exciting time living in Southern California at that time alone was interesting but only six months and a very fast six months.

Q: Well how did you sort of parcel these people? You were part of the process of parceling people out?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, the idea was to find sponsorships for them in local communities. I remember we, again Nick Thorn was a very aggressive leader, we decided that we weren't getting enough reaction from Chinese Americans so I was put on the phone to contact Chinese benevolent associations all over the United States to see if they'd be prepared to take some of the Cheulung Chinese. If you remember the Chao Lon area of Saigon had mostly Chinese population and I can remember specifically Nick Thorn and I and a couple of others going out to court the local Chinese associations in California in order to encourage them to take more of the Chao Lon Chinese. I mean, there was some hands on stuff but a lot of it was simply working as part of the national program with the various NGOs who were really doing the bulk of the work lining up sponsorships.

Q: How did the Chinese benevolent associations respond?

MCWILLIAMS: In California as I recall quite well. Oakland and San Francisco, but especially Los Angeles, I'm hesitating, I'm not sure I should tell this tale but I recall as part of our courting of the Chinese associations in Los Angeles we attended the Double Ten parade, October 10 basically nationalist China, and we attended the parade and we stood as honoree, honored guests, federal government officials on the back of a pick up, back of a long platform truck. And there was a bottle on the stage and I can remember all of us toasting Los Angeles's finest as they came by, as a motorcycle formation, in our brown paper bags. The Chinese thought that was quite funny. But I must say that the Chinese that I worked with, the names I don't remember them now except one, in the San Diego area also, were very, very dedicated in terms of providing humanitarian response to these refugees. And I was very impressed with that.

Q: Yes, you think about spreading people out, you know, taking a whole bunch and just \_\_\_\_\_ Arkansas and all that it's not-



MCWILLIAMS: Talega and-

Q: These aren't the greatest places to go for anyone.

MCWILLIAMS: No. I mean, I think that the camp life was difficult although I think- I didn't see the other camps, Indian Gap in Pennsylvania, for example. I think the camp in Camp Pendleton was pretty good because the Marines who had responsibility for a lot of the work did a good job getting the chow halls ready and so on and the camps were, I think, quite neat and quite clean and reasonably comfortable.

Q: With that assignment, did that put you into anybody's geographic or other type bureau or not or was this-?

MCWILLIAMS: This was, I guess under the refugee bureau. Nick Thorn, being the kind of guy he was, tried to get his key crew to follow him to his next assignment which was in the Sinai and he tried very hard to get me to go to the Sinai with him and indeed broke the assignment that I had been given to Georgetown, Guyana, in order to line me up for the Sinai and ultimately the Sinai fell through. I can't remember exactly why, for me, and I had to find another assignment and lo and behold I wound up in the place I probably most wanted to go which was Laos.

Q: Ah. So this threw you about right back into the briar patch.

MCWILLIAMS: It was exactly where I wanted to go and old Nick basically broke my assignment to Georgetown, thank goodness, which I don't think I really wanted to do and got me back to Asia where I really wanted to be.

Q: Well you went to Laos when?

MCWILLIAMS: In 1976.

Q: And of course this was a very difficult time there.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, yes.

Q: And you were there from '76 to when?



MCWILLIAMS: '78.

Q: Talk about the situation- before we put you in there but when you went out, what did you know about what we were up to? Well, what was happening in Laos? This was after everything had collapsed.

MCWILLIAMS: Well yes. I mean, this was our last outpost in Indochina. We had had a very large presence in Laos. The CIA, of course, was there but AID (Agency for International Development) had a huge presence there, DAO was there and from a very large presence we were knocked down to 24 people. Shortly after I arrived the Lao government cut us in half again down to 12 people so we were the last 12 American officials in all of Indochina. It was a wonderful assignment.

I should say something about the man I worked for, Tom Cochran. Just a little bit about how he got assigned there. Tom Cochran was an older man, I guess in, certainly in his late 50s, sort of a Buddha-like figure, rather heavysset, white haired, very slow but very intelligent and very ponderous in his movements and his thought patterns and so on but extremely intelligent fellow who'd spent years in Indochina. He had been in Hanoi consulate-

Q: He was the last man out of Hanoi.



MCWILLIAMS: He was. He was in Hanoi, he was in Phnom Penh and Saigon and his last overseas assignment was Vientiane. A little story on his appointment there, I'm told, now this is a little hearsay but everybody told me the same thing, when they realized back in '75 that we still had a position in Vientiane, I mean there was debate as to whether or not to keep to the embassy open, but as a window on Vietnam and so on it was felt that we would probably have to do it, but Phil Habib, who was then the assistant secretary, a brilliant man, wonderful man, was faced with the task of finding someone who'd head up our embassy, our mission in Vientiane and he said I don't want someone who's going to be aggressive, out to make policy, out to make waves, you know, the Lao hate us, we've got to get somebody who's not going to be offensive but nonetheless we want someone who's going to stand up for America. And apparently at the big table up in the SEA conference room he was pondering now who can we get, who can we get and someone at the table said how about old Tom Cochran, who was then the Cambodian desk officer. And I'm told that Phil Habib slapped his hands down on the table and said "inspiration!". Old Tom will go there and he won't do a damn thing, that's exactly what we need. Well, in retrospect I think he was a superb mission chief because he did that, he didn't do a thing except when the Lao, using a Vietnamese encouragement tried to embarrass the U.S., he would stand up and he would go over and speak to them in flawless French, insisting on that, and he was, for young officers like myself and one of my compatriots, he was a tremendous model of what the Foreign Service was all about. A great start.

Q: Well no, I mean, he's, I did an interview with him.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh really?

Q: Unfortunately it was one of my early ones and so shorter than I wish it had been but still. No, he personified the Foreign Service the way it was. Good observers, not running around trying to prove themselves but there.



MCWILLIAMS: I can remember several bits of wisdom that he imparted to myself and to Wendy Chamberlain, who was my, I should say after, it was, a couple of things about him and I think this is important. Soon after he was put there he was told that the CIA would be there too. And fully understanding what the CIA's role had been in Laos and what he figured it would be again. He said you can have me out here or you can have the CIA. So the CIA left because Phil Habib said no, I need Tom Cochran out there. And then after about oh, a couple of months the embassy received word from Lao that we had to cut our 24 people to 12 and he could have kept on the old hands, Jerry Broh-Kahn, who was a good officer, my boss, but he said no, I'm going to get the young people to stay. So he kept myself and Wendy Chamberlain, first tour officers, and gave us the responsibility. We were the only political officers there. And indeed Wendy took over responsibility for econ and consular. And was a great role model for us in terms of standing up to Washington bureaucracy, standing up to intimidation from the Lao and just telling us what the Foreign Service was all about.

Q: Okay. What was the situation beyond, we'll talk about our relations, but what was the situation where we were seen in Laos?

MCWILLIAMS: Well. The Lao, Pathet Lao who basically won, had virtually no knowledge of the United States because there had been no contact between the Pathet Lao and the U.S. Moreover they were very much under the tutelage of the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese. So we were in a position of having to become acquainted with a leadership that we had no knowledge of in the context where they were very much, we thought at that time, the puppets of the North Vietnamese who of course hated us and didn't really want us there. I can't remember specifically the rationale but the Soviets and the Chinese, particularly the Soviets, who had a fairly significant presence in Laos, did want us there. They wanted us there, I think, to give legitimacy to the new Lao government that the American embassy would be there because if the American embassy was not there the German embassy probably would close, the Australians wouldn't be there, the New Zealanders wouldn't be there, so we were sort of an anchor for a Western presence in Vientiane which I think the Soviets wanted. So notwithstanding the fact the Vietnamese probably would have liked to have seen all of us out we stayed.



And what was interesting, and again this reflects to some extent Tom's, I think understanding, I should say Mr. Cochran's understanding, I never just called him Tom, Mr. Cochran's understanding of Indochina, he said you know, we shouldn't think the Vietnamese and the Lao are the same, they are different. And there are some, probably some antipathy between the Lao and the Vietnamese just as there was between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. So he sought to get to know the Lao at a very gradual level and Wendy Chamberlain, who was actually junior to me by six months had spoken Lao because, and spoke it very well because she had been part of the, oh some sort of an NGO that work in Laos, I can't remember the name. And Tom I think very effectively used Wendy, who was a very charming and very vivacious young woman who spoke very good Lao to some extent to ingratiate himself, ingratiate us with the Lao. And I think Wendy as a first tour officer played a significant role in helping us get to know the Lao leadership and I think Mr. Cochran's instincts were right that there were some differences between the Lao and the Vietnamese and I think working that angle he began to create a little bit of space for us that actually constituted a Lao-American relationship. And I think his wisdom in pursuing that and Wendy's tactical ability in charming people was very important.

I can relate on instance.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Tom used to have these grand old receptions in our grand old residence and of course you'd invite the entire diplomatic community. And Phoumi Vongvichit, who was one of the heroes, one of the more progressive, more interesting, philosophical communists in the Pathet Lao structure, I think he was minister of health at that point, I'm not sure what he was minister of but Phoumi Vongvichit I remember quite well; handsome fellow, charming in his own way, very French in his own way and he spoke French beautifully, of course. He had shown up. Usually we didn't get many ministers to our receptions but he was there. And Wendy in her wonderful way went right over to him and started speaking to him in Lao, of course, and Vongvichit loved this, this American speaking Lao and very well and so on. And the Soviet ambassador came up and in a rather pompous way, in perfect French of course, turned to Phoumi Vongvichit and said what language is this woman speaking? And Phoumi with obvious anger said "she is speaking Lao, that is my language!". In French of course. And that was a story that resonated for several weeks through the community that Phoumi Vongvichit obviously appreciated the fact that this American embassy was attempting to speak to him in his language.

Q: What were we doing there? I mean-



MCWILLIAMS: Almost nothing. We, you know, there were old asset problems. You know, we had controlled a lot of property that we simply no longer controlled and there were periodic discussions about how we might get that property back. Not very serious. I think in a Lao-American context we were doing very little. What I was doing and I think to a large extent what Wendy was doing was trying to use Vientiane as a watch post because as it was there was a diplomatic presence in Hanoi. We weren't there, of course, but others were; the Aussies were there, for example, early on the Japanese were there.

Q: Canadians had been there a long time.

MCWILLIAMS: Canadians. But the point was that the transit point between Hanoi and the rest of the world was Bangkok through Vientiane. So quite often we would have people coming out of Hanoi, spending a couple of days in Vientiane at their embassies and then going down to Bangkok, because at that point very limited air support between Bangkok and Vientiane. So we would basically talk to these diplomats as they came in from Hanoi about what's going on in Vietnam and then of course go back to our typewriters and hurry up and write reports. So we were basically do the intelligence thing on the rest of Indochina using that as a very limited window as to what was going on.

Q: Did you ever have any contact with the Vietnamese leaders who came to Vientiane?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, essentially no although I remember at one point Mr. Corcoran had to go down to Bangkok for medical reasons and I was left as chargé; ½, this is a 27, 28 year old kid as chargé; ½, and that happened to be the weekend that Pham Van Dong and Le Duan the leaders of Vietnam, who had been against us all these years, came to Vientiane sort of for their victory rout tour. And I sent this- I at the American embassy received an invitation to go to the airport to represent the American embassy. And I remember feverish messages back and forth to Washington, should I go, should I not go? What should I do? And finally the message came back saying that I was correct in saying that we should "not, not go" basically. So I showed up and I remember in the long line of the diplomatic line at the airport receiving Pham Van Dong and Le Duan. I stood at the very tail end of the diplomatic line because I obviously had very low rank and right next to the Cuban, oddly enough. And as they came through, in my rather poor Vietnamese I shook his hand and told him who I was. He got this incredible startled look and then a glare. Right behind him was Pham Van Dong who was smiling from ear to ear, just thinking it was funny that the Americans had showed up. But I was able to shake both of their hands. But other than that contact, no. We had no contact with the Vietnamese at all.

Q: Did, were we concerned with the missing in action?



MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, yes, I should have mentioned that right away. This was a terribly important issue in Washington, of course, and that was very high on our agenda but frankly we had no, we had virtually, I cannot remember any action on that at all in Vientiane. Subsequently when I was assigned to Bangkok we saw more action but at that time, although it was a very important issue no, I had no action on that.

Q: I've been interviewing Terry Tull and Terry was talking about how she was a- I mean, you know, they began to open up-

MCWILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: And get going. I mean, it's become almost an industry there.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, it was becoming that when I was in Bangkok as well, yes.

Q: What about, had the Laotian government forces pretty much taken over everything or did we have warehouses full of stuff sitting there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, there was a place called Silver City which was the USAID compound and I guess there was lots of stuff up there. I know that one of the senior officials in the foreign ministry was driving around in an American sports car, a red one, I can't remember what it was, but it was basically stolen. But as I recall we had very little luck getting anything back, obviously.

One other issue that was important and it became very important when I went across to Bangkok was the fate of the Hmong because there was still fighting, of course, going on up there and we would get some inklings of some of the battles and so on at the embassy reported but very little because we weren't really doing anything like that.

Q: Well tell me, how about getting over to Thailand? Were you able to?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, that's part of the story actually. At one point, I guess it was in '77, there was a flash, flare up between Laos and Thailand and the one skimpy little airline, air route between Bangkok and Laos went down. As I recall I think it was the Soviets that were flying it. But in any event there was no longer any air communication so the only communication was across the Mekong and you had to get into these boats and try to cross the Mekong to Nong Kai and then take the train from Nong Kai down to Bangkok. And that was always an adventure because of course Nong Kai was a big town, you could buy things there; there was very little available in Vientiane. But crossing that river, depending upon the season, was always arduous and there are a number of tales where a diplomat's trying to cross, the motor would quit midway across and those boats would just go off, you know, in tremendous current on the Mekong, just go way south of Nong Kai and then have to sort of get that engine started and work their way back up the other coast. But that was always fun, traveling over to Nong Kai because you're never sure you can get over there or get back.

Q: What sort of support were you getting and when you got to Bangkok were you debriefed and all that?

MCWILLIAMS: No, not a great deal of that. We were reporting fairly voluminously out of Vientiane so that there wasn't too much of that. Basically it was sort of like a little R&R you'd get down to Bangkok. But for Wendy and I, we often would just take off on the weekends and go over to Nong Kai, as I say, which is charming little Thai river town and buy what you needed and get back over to Vientiane.

Q: When you say you're reporting voluminously, what were you reporting on?

MCWILLIAMS: Well basically diplomatic chatter. The Canadian or the Aussie diplomat out of Hanoi told me the following. And also, of course, we would be working the diplomatic circuit. It was, for a little, very, very small capital you had a very large diplomatic presence there. And as a consequence there were receptions and parties almost every night and basically Wendy and I were sort of known as, I think there was always a question among our observers as to who was the CIA agent, Wendy or me. But we would be digging for information, of course, at these parties.

Q: Did- who else was, you know, this 12-person embassy?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that was including the Marine detachment.

Q: Oh, you had a Marine detachment?



MCWILLIAMS: We had five or six people, five or six Marines there. But I remember at one point they were ordered out, reducing us down to six people. And I remember I had a farewell party for them, a dinner party, just Americans, and I remember the toast which Cochran liked. I said this is the last, you are the last military, U.S. military to be in Indochina for the last 30 years. Anyway, he thought that was good, he liked history. But we were down to six. Julie Holmes was our secretary, Wayne Swedenburg was one of several admin officers and then we had a series of communicators and I'm afraid I'm not going to remember all of their names. The communicators tended to be in and out. But we were down to six for awhile.

Q: Did you get any visitors from the State Department or anywhere?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes sure, we had State Department types coming in. I'm trying to remember any congressional delegations. We had staffers in. Offhand I can't remember any CODELs. But Bob Oakley had come out; he was the DAS. Phil Habib I don't think came out, nor did Dick Holbrooke, who succeeded him, that I can recall. Dick Holbrooke came out later after I had left. Oh, Mansfield, Mike Mansfield came out and that was a good visit, I recall that.

Q: He was ambassador to Japan at the time.

MCWILLIAMS: Well no, no, he was senate majority leader.

Q: Senator majority leader.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I can remember we put him up at the hotel, which sounds strange at the time but we basically didn't have room at the ambassador's residence, and I decided I was going to get over there really early, I was his control officer, make sure everything went well, and I arrived like 6:30 and there he's sitting alone in this huge old lobby waiting for someone to deal with him. But obviously he was an early riser, old Montana guy, but very, very nice man, wonderful man to work with. My first staff del, or CODEL, I guess.

Q: What about the Laos? First the officials. Could you go and talk to them?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. That was the thing that I think struck me most. The Lao themselves, if you've ever had dealings with them, are among the most charitable, generous, warm, lovely people, absolutely gorgeous people. And we found with a few of the Lao officials that you could break through and have a person-to-person communication. Some of them were hard as nails and you just couldn't talk to them but some of them were more Lao than communist, we used to say.

Q: What about the people? Could you sort of get out and mix with the people?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. And there wasn't a great deal of following. That is to say the Pathet Lao were not particularly interested in chasing us around as was the case in Afghanistan and Moscow where I served subsequently. But as a consequence, Wendy and I would get out on our bikes and go off into the countryside. I should say we were pretty much confined to Vientiane and its environs but its environs, of course, were very rural in those days so it was really a treat to get out and go orchid hunting or just meeting with the local people.

Q: Did you feel that the equivalent of the Secret Service or something, the intelligence service was particularly interested in you or was this not that sophisticated?

MCWILLIAMS: Well you know, I think it reflects perhaps to some extent my naiveté<sup>1/2</sup> in those days but I didn't notice that particularly. And I'm sure that they did, I'm sure that they were following us because even some of our Western diplomatic colleagues assumed Wendy or I were CIA and for that reason I'm sure there would have been, perhaps even the Soviets or the Vietnamese might have been interested in what we were doing but I don't remember specifically any obvious tailing in that period.

Q: Was there any sort of intrusion by irregular American-led forces or Thais or anything like that?

MCWILLIAMS: No, not in those days. Now subsequently there was a lot of cross border efforts, particularly in the MIA issue but no. I recall one incident where an old U.S. military fellow from the Vietnam era had gotten onto a plane in Bangkok and somehow managed to get into Hanoi and apparently, as I recall, looking for his wife, a Vietnamese woman. And this was a big mess, of course, and he got turned around, he got on a plane back to Vientiane, in custody, and we were able to get him out of custody and get him safely back to Bangkok. I remember the incident because my friend Wendy Chamberlain did a very good job in negotiating that through and it could have been a mess but she sort of took charge of that as the consular officer, did a very good job on that.



Q: Well then, was Cochran there the whole time you were there?

MCWILLIAMS: No. He left in '77 I believe and George Roberts came in, a very different fellow, very capable, very charming, loquacious, had a wonderful wife named Zara who enlivened our diplomatic community significantly. He was of a mind unlike Tom to try to improve ties and I think subsequent to Tom Cochran most of the chiefs of mission there were aggressive in that sense, trying to build ties, build relationships with the local government, even Wendy subsequently, who did wind up as ambassador, as I recall, not chargé 1/2, these were all chargé 1/2s. There is, I think, in the Foreign Service a tendency to try to improve relationships even with the worst of governments.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: That's just sort of instinctually what you do although interestingly then you give these farewell speeches frequently which damn local government. I've seen that happen. But George tried very hard to improve the relationship. I think it was premature but he was careful with what he did.

Q: Was there any concern about people who had been pro American or what have you, I mean, put in concentration camps and that sort of thing?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. We were aware of a number of people and indeed reports would come back about conditions. And we would, obviously- no, I shouldn't say obviously, we would on occasion raise this with the Lao but I think our feeling was at that time and I think appropriately that calling attention to our concern about these individuals probably wouldn't do them any good. When I served in Moscow subsequently we very much made use of the relationship, Moscow to Washington, to try to intervene on behalf of individuals who were not necessarily our friends but who were dissidents and refuseniks and so on. But no, in Laos we didn't do that a lot and I think in fact in retrospect it would have been a mistake to do that.

Q: Well I think there are times to do something and times not do and sometimes it's hard to distinguish, you know, to make the decision.

MCWILLIAMS: Now, when I was in Laos of course the old king was still alive and there was always interest in what had happened to him and we did get some reporting on him. I can remember my maid, I mean the local Lao community was an excellent source of information, saying something about the king and I immediately perked up, this was probably at home, and she refused to speak to me, wouldn't speak about it because she was afraid, of course, and finally she went like this, putting her wrists together, shook her head and sobbed a little bit.



Q: As though he were handcuffed.

MCWILLIAMS: That he was being held that way. And he subsequently died in captivity.

Q: What about, was there any reflection, looking at the map I can see that you've got a long piece of territory before you get to Cambodia and obviously you couldn't get there. Were you getting any reflection from the Cambodian holocaust?

MCWILLIAMS: No. Not a thing. And indeed that only really became I think apparent when I began service in 1980 in Bangkok. Even at that point it wasn't really clear until the refugees began to come out in great numbers. That's a different period, different era.

Q: Well then, is there anything else you should discuss there?

MCWILLIAMS: On Laos? No. I think in retrospect it was interesting that that leadership that we dealt with remained in power; I mean those very personalities, for nearly 20 years after we'd left. So I think that Mr. Cochran's original insight into trying to develop almost a personal relationship with some of them and his approach on that was probably right because otherwise it would have just been us dealing with Vietnamese puppets.

Q: I have to say I just finished, about two days ago, a series of interviews with Marie Huhtala.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes.

Q: And Marie at one point was desk officer to the Southeast Asian hand-

MCWILLIAMS: She was in Chiang Mai when I was in Bangkok.

Q: -for Laos among other places. But just saying, you know, essentially it was and is essentially a stagnant area.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I mean, we forget it's still a very much a communist government. I'm afraid still very much beholden to Hanoi. The only thing that's new and I think it's a tragedy for us old Lao hands is that they finally bridged the Mekong and I think what you have now is, as I understand it, a great deal of Thai enterprise now in Laos, taking down trees and so on. And that's unfortunate because there is tremendous natural beauty and natural wealth in Laos. Laos, I've always felt it should have been an island somewhere but sandwiched between two very aggressive neighbors, the Vietnamese and the Thai and of course the Chinese up north, it's a particularly unfortunate place.

Q: Well during the time you were there we were getting closer to China. Did that make any difference?

MCWILLIAMS: No. At that time there wasn't much closeness in the relationship, certainly not reflected in Vientiane. Tremendous interest in what the Chinese might or might not be doing up in the north at that point. They controlled pretty much the northernmost province. But no, I can't remember too much, any interaction with the Chinese.

Q: Did you have any connection with the Hmong?

MCWILLIAMS: Subsequently yes.

Q: But at that point?

MCWILLIAMS: No, at that point not very much. We did a little bit of reporting, as I said earlier, about reports of conflict with the Hmong and some of the problems the Hmong were facing in dealing not so much with the Lao but with the Vietnamese. We also had, I should mention, a number of peace groups, the Mennonites and the Quakers were in Vientiane and as Americans we of course had pretty close relations with them and lots of debates because of course they took a very different perspective. But I'm actually still friendly with the Mennonites who were out there at the time and in retrospect I think they had it right in a lot of ways. They were trying to respond with the humanitarian concerns in Laos.

Q: Well, were they accepted in Laos?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I think so. Because they had been there a long time and because their humanitarian focus was so genuine and I think pretty widely accepted they had a pretty secure position in Laos.



Q: Well then, you left there when?

MCWILLIAMS: In 1978.

Q: Whither?

MCWILLIAMS: I came back to be the Lao desk officer and then the Cambodia/Vietnam desk officer in a two year span, '78 to '80.

Q: What was this period like? Was this a period of, I mean, this is the Carter time. Maybe this might be a good place to stop, what do you think?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, I'll tell you, if we're going to get into that it's a whole different realm, so maybe.

Q: Yes, it's a whole different realm and I was just thinking we'll put at the end of the tape here. We're going to pick this up in 1978 when you're back to Washington.

MCWILLIAMS: Right. Holbrooke was then assistant secretary, was a very interesting, dynamic leader as well.

Q: Good. Well, we'll pick it up then. Great.

Okay. Today is the 15th of December, the Ides of December.

MCWILLIAMS: The Ides of December, yes.

Q: Of 2005. All right. You went back to east, what was it called then, the bureau?

MCWILLIAMS: East Asian Pacific.

Q: East Asian Pacific. And you were there from when to when?

MCWILLIAMS: I got back in the summer of '78 and stayed until the summer of '80.



Q: And what was your position?

MCWILLIAMS: My first job, lasting just about a year, was the desk officer for Laos and Cambodia. And after that one year I moved to the desk officer responsibility for Cambodia and Vietnam.

Q: Okay. Let's- you mentioned Dick Holbrooke. You want to talk a little about his operation and how he hit your bureau?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, he was a force of nature in the bureau. He was- he intimidated people. I know a number of the senior officers, I of course was a very junior officer, were quite intimidated by him but at the same time he obviously sought out talent in people, he pushed people to do their best and he was, for me at least, very much someone from whom I learned a lot. He was a very political fellow, he knew the Hill, he worked the Hill very well. He knew the administration very well and he was able at various points to, I think, win support for particular initiatives by virtue of knowing how to work within the administration. At that point Vice President Mondale was a very significant figure in the administration to whom he had access. He also had a very close relationship with Senator Kennedy, Ted Kennedy, and used those relationships to advance his perspectives and his initiatives.

Q: Well, let's talk about Laos and Cambodia at the time. What was ticking? I mean, this is three years after we bugged out of the whole area except for our tiny foothold in Laos.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, there wasn't very much on our agenda in either country at that point. I had just come out of Laos, of course, and that was a very sterile relationship. There was a brief initiative, essentially from the State Department, to relax some of the restrictions on the relationship, trying to seek support for this in Congress which failed. I was a part of that but very minor effort. And of course with Cambodia at that point the Khmer Rouge were in control and we had virtually no contact at all with the Cambodians although I do recall at one point there was an attempt to begin at least communications, quiet communications with the Cambodians and this was to be accomplished through an initiative that myself and my director took by going up to the UN to meet with the Cambodian delegation and I forget frankly exactly the ruse under which we agreed to meet. But in the course of the conversation it was planned that actually as the junior officer I would say that in addition to the rather specific, and I can't recall what the issue was we were supposed to be discussing, that we would be open to communications on other issues as well.

Q: You know, it was such an overriding thing it may well have been the missing in action.



MCWILLIAMS: It could have been that. Honestly I don't recall what that issue was. It may come to me but it was an issue that we could defend. It may well have been that. It was an issue that we could defend communication with them about but then sort of sub-rosa there was also supposed to have been an indication to them, which I think they failed to pick up, very frankly, that we would welcome communication, that we would agree to communication on other issues as well.

Q: Did you get any feel for their delegation? Because I mean, here was this very odd group that came out, sort of the French intellectual morass or whatever you want to call it.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, I think that was part of it. I don't remember in great detail but I think our perspective as we came away was that this was not a political powerful set of figures, that they were essentially old Francophone Khmer who were in New York principally because of their worldliness and the fact that they could speak French and not English, incidentally, but that this was not an active point for their diplomacy.

Q: While you were there, I mean the two years you were dealing with Cambodia, were you getting any, what were we catching about later became known as the killing fields, the enormity of what was going on in Laos- or in Cambodia?

MCWILLIAMS: In Cambodia. Well, it was a very interesting time because as you remember at that point it was really very closed and there were rumors coming out of dreadful things going on and I can recall that some of the more left leaning academics, and there weren't very many academics focused on Cambodia but some of them, were reluctant to admit or to acknowledge, that the Khmer Rouge were doing terrible things. It was of course our point to suggest that this communist government was in fact a very bad government. But even we didn't have a lot of information.

Jumping just ahead a little bit. It was really only when the refugees began to pour into Thailand, across the border in '79 that it became clear just the enormity of what the Khmer Rouge had done. And I would credit Ambassador Abramowitz, who was then ambassador in Bangkok and his wife Sheppie for really alerting the U.S. administration and more broadly, I think, the international community just to the extent to which the people of Cambodia were suffering, both on the border and of course inside.

Q: It's an interesting point. Obviously we were talking about, when we left Vietnam, the bloodbath that would occur which really didn't. I mean, it was not great but it wasn't as, well, it was a modified bloodbath.



MCWILLIAMS: We can talk about that perhaps at some point.

Q: We'll talk about that in a minute. But with Cambodia, I mean, from the administration point of view, the worst things were in Cambodia, the more easily it was to point to the horrors of communism. But then you had the, sort of the left wing which was quite powerful in those days in our intellectual environment because they had been opposed to the whole war in Vietnam and they were trying to portray all of this as, you know, these are the forces of goodness and light and all coming to the fore.

MCWILLIAMS: I think you have...

Q: This is tape two, side one with Ed McWilliams. Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Regarding Cambodia and sort of the controversy about how to describe the Khmer Rouge government, I think that the United States government certainly initially, without any kind of contact with that government at all and knowing that it was a communist government, essentially an adversary obviously for us in the war was, we were disposed to be very critical of it whereas I think the left again, sort of remaining in their sort of war perspective were inclined to defend it to some extent. But I think both U.S. government and U.S. government critics were really unaware of just what was going on in Cambodia because it was such a closed society. I mentioned just a moment ago that there was basically a failed initiative at a very low level on our part to open at least communications with the Khmer Rouge. I should say the reason for that was in part our concern that the Vietnamese were emerging as real adversaries of the Cambodians and there was concern, at least at the analytical side to the extent also it influenced policy, that we may be facing tremendous Vietnamese pressure on Cambodia and that as a consequence we needed to be in communication with the Cambodians. In a sense we were correct because as you recall back in '79 the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, of course, very successfully in terms of their military operation and we were faced with what I think we had feared in '78, that is to say Vietnamese communists controlling Cambodia and we saw this of course in the same old domino context, that this would ultimately pose a real problem perhaps for Thailand, if you had Vietnamese communists occupying right up to Bahambong, right up to the border of Thailand.

Just one little reflection. I recall, I described the Vietnamese invasion as very successful. A senior Vietnamese I recall at that time told a French colleague whom he knew very well that we, Vietnamese, had succeeded in everything we wanted to do in terms of the invasion except we failed to free Sihanouk. Meaning to say they failed to capture Sihanouk because Sihanouk was then and I think to a very real extent even today remains a critical element in Cambodian politics even though he's now retired.



Q: You moved over to the Cambodian-Vietnamese desk. Well, let's keep with Cambodia first. Okay '79, why were refugees coming out? It had been four years.

MCWILLIAMS: Well now, I'm going to have to go back and scratch my memory here a little bit. As I recall the impetus for movement of Khmer inside Cambodia was the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime under Vietnamese pressure. Once the Khmer Rouge lost Phnom Penh, which was very soon after the Vietnamese invaded, of course, then you began to see the ability of people in Cambodia to flee. Not only the fighting between Vietnamese and Cambodians- Khmer Rouge but more specifically to flee Khmer Rouge control. Khmer Rouge control over Cambodia broke down and I think people were able to begin to move. So I think that was the impetus really that drove these people to the Cambodian border in '79.

Q: How did we view- the Vietnamese invasion was what? '79?

MCWILLIAMS: I'm trying to remember exact dates here. It was '79 because then of course it was followed by the Chinese invasion of Vietnam which was in December of '79.

Q: And you were at the desk at this?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

Q: Well let's stick- we're getting confused here. We've got a war down south and a war up north.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it was almost the same war. It was really a Chinese- the Chinese invasion was pretty clearly a response to the Vietnamese invasion of its ally the Khmer Rouge.

Q: Let's talk about how we viewed Vietnam going into Cambodia. I mean, we were saying was this ah ha, the domino has fallen or this was the Carter administration which had made a point of trying to distance itself from the Vietnamese war?



MCWILLIAMS: Well yes. There's a very important sequence here which I think we need to get into in the fall of '79. There was an attempt by Holbrooke to establish communications with Hanoi basically to begin to rebuild a relationship- to build a relationship with Vietnam. This was resisted in the Carter administration in part because also in the administration, particularly under the lead of Zbigniew Brzezinski there was an attempt to improve relations with China. And there was really a competition as to whether to move forward with Hanoi or to move forward with Beijing in the fall of '79. Holbrooke, because he was a very good political operator in part, was successful in moving and advancing the game with Hanoi even to the point where U.S. teams and Vietnamese teams were established to look at old- our old embassy facilities and where embassies might be established. There was a beginning discussion about establishing at least offices that would function as embassies and this is in the early fall of '79 and it was what was called the double track policy. That is, we're going to move forward with China and we're going to move forward with Vietnam. And that was the administration approach. And then of course came the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and in December the Chinese invasion of Vietnam. And this essentially scuttled efforts by Holbrooke at that point to reestablish some level of communication with Hanoi, to establish it and say reestablish. So it was a very interesting and frenetic diplomatic period. I'm not sure if it's been very well covered in the literature yet but it was a very interesting time.

Q: What were you doing when we were working on this dual track approach particularly on the Vietnamese side? What would the desk officer be doing?

MCWILLIAMS: Well at that time the really interesting work, of course, was being handled by Holbrooke himself and his immediate deputies. At my level it was essentially the scud work. I do recall I was involved in, as I say, the embassy questions as to what facilities might Vietnamese move into, what facilities might the U.S. team move into in Vietnam, looking at photographs from the air and so on of facilities and so. I mean, it was advancing quite well but we simply were overtaken by events, the Vietnamese invading Cambodia and as I say China-

Q: I mean, you were in the peculiar position of being a desk officer of two countries in which we had no representatives.

MCWILLIAMS: That's right, yes. And very little communication.

Q: Did that, I mean, did you find that you were almost having to look for, I mean, where were you, what were you getting-



MCWILLIAMS: There was a hell of a lot of work to do. At that time, of course, there was tremendous press interest and academic interest in both Vietnam and Cambodia, tremendous interest on the Hill as well, and it was a very busy job and frankly it was only thanks to an extremely good director, Steve Lyne, that I was able to keep my head above water. Certainly under the Laos, when I was Laos/Cambodia desk officer there wasn't a whole lot really to address but that one year working as Vietnam/Cambodia officer was extremely busy because simply so much was going on and I was new to the State Department bureaucracy, I had never actually worked in the State Department and only a second tour officer so I relied very much on leadership of a very good director, Steve Lyne.

Q: What was his background?

MCWILLIAMS: Steve, like many of the people working on Vietnam, had spent years in Vietnam. And he had also served on the French side, in Algeria, so he had French and he had Vietnamese and also had Cambodian experience so he was very well suited to the job, a very young man at the time, in his early 40s.

Q: Well, in a way did you feel that you had a hell of a lot of people with Vietnam experience around the department including Holbrooke, who had taken-

MCWILLIAMS: Sure, sure, Saigon experience.

Q: -amazed, I mean, he'd been a Vietnam hand, too.

MCWILLIAMS: And of course Phil Habib was, although no longer assistant secretary, still a very influential figure.

Q: He'd been deputy ambassador there.

MCWILLIAMS: Right. And he had been assistant secretary, of course, just before Holbrooke.

Q: Yes.



MCWILLIAMS: So he was, there were many people with deep experience on Vietnam and probably a greater assemblage of current knowledge and experience on Vietnam than we'd ever had. And also it should be noted that many of these people, like Holbrooke himself, had emerged to some extent as critics of our policy in Vietnam so that it was a very dynamic and a lot of fresh perspective was being brought to the issues.

Q: What were you getting about internal politics within Vietnam? Was it based on newspapers, broadcasts, the usual stuff?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. We didn't have any particularly good knowledge of what was going on in Vietnam. We had that window in Vientiane which periodically was helpful. The embassy in Bangkok continued to watch Indochina very closely. I actually took a job in that capacity just a year later. I know we monitored the media very closely and that was helpful to us to some extent.

Q: Had there developed the state-of-the-art of criminology as we had with the Soviet Union? Or was- or maybe it wasn't the same dynamics that you could play. Who stood where?

MCWILLIAMS: There was, there was extensive knowledge, of course, of these players because we'd been watching them for over a decade but I think the fact was that there wasn't at that time a great deal of movement within the Hanoi leadership. It was a united leadership and there wasn't a great deal we could learn, I think, about what the inner leadership felt and were doing.

I should mention at this point and I failed to mention earlier a critical issue that really ran through all of what we did on Vietnam, to a lesser extent to Laos and Cambodia was of course the MIA issue. It was an extremely important issue in the congress, in the American people, among the American people and in the administration and I think there was a sense that the Carter administration had to continually prove that it was genuinely concerned about MIAs. And I think it was almost a defensive effort because there was a tendency to believe that the administration wasn't serious in its pursuit of the MIA issue. So that was a very important aspect of what we were doing as well.

Q: When it happened, in the first place there was yet any foreknowledge of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia?

MCWILLIAMS: I think there were signs, yes, yes, yes. Yes, we did have some expectation because of course we were able to still to monitor Vietnamese military movements and-



Q: This was mainly by both radio and by satellite?

MCWILLIAMS: Intel, yes, Intel. But I do recall as it became clear that we were moving, that the Vietnamese were moving towards some sort of an invasion, some sort of military action, there was some frantic efforts on the part of the administration to get Hanoi to hold off making the point that if they were to invade it would be impossible at that time to move forward with any kind of a relationship, bilateral relationship, and I do recall efforts to communicate that to the Vietnamese. Obviously the Vietnamese felt that they had to address what they saw as a Cambodian problem.

Q: What was the- from the Vietnamese perspective what was the Cambodian problem? Why did they go in?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it's important to remember the Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge were pretty aggressive. They had perceived Vietnamese living in Cambodia to be a threat to their national security, had forced many of them to return to Vietnam. There had been a number of skirmishes along the border over border questions between Vietnamese troops and Khmer troops. There had been a war of words of course. So it was a very bad relationship and quite clearly deteriorating for a couple of years. Almost immediately after the Khmer Rouge came to power the relationship between Hanoi and Phnom Penh was not good.

Q: Did- what were our concerns sort of? If the Vietnamese did this would they be, I mean did we see this as maybe putting an end to a really repugnant regime or did we see this as part of a- you know, we're talking about '79, a part of the occupation and Vietnamization of Cambodia?

MCWILLIAMS: Much more the latter. I think, once again, I don't think any of us really understood the extent of the horror of Khmer Rouge rule but much more important in our calculations in those days was the strategic question of whether or not Vietnam would come to control Cambodia and thereby pose a real threat to Thailand.

Q: When they went in did we do anything?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, of course it pretty much scuttled our attempts to establish contact with Hanoi.

Q: Yes.



MCWILLIAMS: I think, again, I mentioned earlier that the effort to establish some sort of contact with the Cambodians in New York I think that would have just preceded the invasion. So no, there wasn't much we could do at that stage. We were more concerned, I think, subsequently when the Chinese responded with an invasion. I'm just trying to recall if there was any effort to talk to Beijing to hold it back from what we anticipated might be a very negative reaction. I don't recall, I may simply not have known whether or not we were encouraging Beijing not to respond to this invasion forcefully.

Q: Okay. Well let's move to the other border of Vietnam. How did we view, from your as the desk officer and people around you, in fact well the whole bureau I mean, because China was the aggressor in this case, view the Vietnam-China, Sino-Vietnamese war?

MCWILLIAMS: With interest. Obviously we had no dogs in this fight in a sense. I think one of our concerns was the implications for the, for Soviet policy. Soviet-Chinese relations were not good. Soviet-Vietnamese relations had been good and I do recall, it's sort of ironic, we had had a massive snowstorm, I think it was just after the turn of the year, in other words January 1980, and 20-some inches as I recall, and I had fought my way in. I think I was in the bureau and I think Holbrooke was in the bureau and there was very few other people and a call came in from the desk that a Soviet diplomat was at the desk downstairs wanting to talk to someone about Vietnam. And this is, he plowed through the snow himself and the State Department was essentially not functioning that day. So as the Vietnam desk officer I was sent down to meet him and we had this long conversation. And then Holbrooke had told me I want you to come in and meet Lee and tell me what he says. And I gave him basically what he had said and that the implication was that the Soviets were not going to react to this Chinese invasion and Holbrooke was sort of taking notes and barely paying attention. And I said oh I should say also at the very end of his conversation Mr. Holbrooke, he said something about I am now speaking for my government. And Holbrooke obviously sat up and said well don't you know what that means, junior officer? That this is a formal message from Moscow that they are not going to intervene in this. And I said oh, I guess, yes, I guess so. Really feeling stupid, you know, I blew my great moment. But I recall that very specifically the Soviets informed us early on that they were not going to take a role in this. And I think at that point we just decided let it go on. I don't think we played a role at that moment.

Q: Yes. Well, were we concerned at this point, I mean, while you were dealing with Vietnam, about I always think it was Camron Bay because, I mean, becoming a Soviet base.



MCWILLIAMS: Sure. Sure, that was considered and of course the Soviets did develop that base. And it was seen in the context of, you know, a communist threat to Southeast Asia, still part of old domino concept. But I don't recall us doing much of anything. I remember watching the issue very closely. I mean, we had satellite and so on, photos of, but I don't recall that we undertook any measures to deal with that question.

Q: Were we keeping our military at some distance from Vietnam at that time? I'm thinking, you know, snoopers flights or whatever you want to call it. You know, around the coast.

MCWILLIAMS: We were, you know, we were watching the area very closely. I can't speak to any specific things we were doing. You will recall that there was the incident where a yacht, American-crewed yacht, wound up on a Cambodian island. This is, I'm sorry, this is jumping back, actually this is just after, that doesn't fit into the sequence, no, that doesn't work. But no, we were watching it very closely but I can't say much more than that, that would be on the Pentagon side.

Q: Did offshore islands play any role when you were there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, one of the territorial disputes that the Khmer Rouge had with the Vietnamese dealt with islands. And I had mentioned sort of the border dispute, indeed there were skirmishes. I think there were also some naval skirmishes between Vietnamese and Khmer. You recall that much of the delta of South Vietnam was regarded as Khmer Krom territory, that is to say originally Cambodian lands. And I think the Khmer Rouge in their bizarre approach to current politics were essentially very interested in reclaiming the delta, the Mekong Delta. So I mean, it was a bizarre government and I can't say that the Vietnamese were right to attack but I think given the circumstances, Vietnamese belligerence was not surprising.

Q: Well then, did, I'm trying to think, was there any other- well how about Thailand during this? I mean, it wasn't your thing but you were in the bureau. Were we getting things that Thais were getting pretty nervous about?

MCWILLIAMS: Sure they were. And at that time I think Kriangsak was leading Thailand. He was there certainly when I was there. But we were very tight with Thailand. Remember we still had military forces in Thailand and clearly, as I said earlier, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in terms of its most important consequence for U.S. policy was the potential threat to Thailand.

Q: Well then, you left there in 1980.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Whither?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, let me just say the one little element because it impacted very much on my subsequent work. One of the things that, as I said Thailand, the embassy in Thailand was doing very well for us, was watching things in Laos and Vietnam and Cambodia, a watch post embassy, and one of the issues that began to emerge initially in the press was the issue of yellow rain.

Q: Oh yes.

MCWILLIAMS: The whole notion that the Vietnamese and Lao communists were using some sort of chemical, using air dispersed, against the Hmong, our old allies in Laos. And I, I guess sort of a troublemaker; I kept sending messages to Bangkok asking about these reports and what's going on out there. And at some point and I can't remember exactly when in '79 the embassy, I think in some frustration, invited me out to sort of look at the issue myself as a desk officer. So I did go out and work with Tim Carney and a few others and frankly picked up fairly interesting reports particularly out of Laos about this among the refugees who'd come out, the Hmong refugees.

I mention that because when I went to Bangkok in June of 1980 one of the jobs they gave me was to continue to work on the yellow rain story. That job, I went out as I say in June I think it was of 1980, to work as the, one of two Indochina watch officers, the junior one under Tim Carney. Tim was a great Cambodia hand and I was thought to be something of a Lao hand and because I still had some Vietnamese from my military experience he focused on Cambodia which of course was becoming extremely important because of the refugee movement and I was sort of given the portfolio for Laos and Vietnam although I also worked along the border, the Cambodian border as did Tim.

Q: So you went out there from 1980 to when?

MCWILLIAMS: 'Til June of 1982.

Q: Why don't we follow up the yellow rain story? In the first place, what was, how did it get, become a current issue and then what-?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, it was in the press and I, working with a fellow in the defense attaché's office, Denny Lane, Colonel Denny Lane, became quite intrigued with this story and we did a lot of reporting, particularly interviewing refugees. And I think our information, which did get to the press, I think deliberately, was useful in creating some publicity problems for Hanoi obviously and for the Lao government. But it was not taken terribly seriously until it became a question of whether or not perhaps the Soviets had provided the technology for some of this chemical warfare against the Hmong. And I recall Secretary of State Haig at one point in Europe somehow began to speak about this and suddenly it became a major issue, that the U.S. essentially was endorsing the perspective that there was something real here. This all came as something of a surprise to us because myself and Denny Lane had been sort of developing information on this and it was getting, it was rather difficult to get anyone in the embassy or even Washington, we thought, to pay attention to what we were finding. And as a consequence of Secretary Haig's statement we were given a lot of, how should I say, longer leash to work this issue. We also teamed up with a former military doctor, Amos Townsend, who was working with refugees on refugee issues along the border and he assisted us in developing more information about the medical evidence with regards to yellow rain, taking blood samples and urine samples from supposed victims and so on. So for most of my two years there that was a principle element of my portfolio, developing information that would resolve the question of whether or not yellow rain was being used against the Hmong. And also, I should say, there were some reports of it also being used in Cambodia.

Q: As you got into this what were sort of the initial reaction and as stuff developed? I mean, was there something there?

MCWILLIAMS: It's still a great question. There's a book that's just been written or I should say some research just been done at Princeton University, a very interesting study which was a thesis and which I believe is now becoming a book. And interestingly she has come to the conclusion after extensive reviewing of the data that indeed there probably was something there. My own perspective is that notwithstanding critics of our thesis, that the notion that there was real use of chemical weapons against the Hmong, I think there was something there. I think that we never really invested the resources to develop the information so that it would be truly credible to the scientific community. I think that's unfortunately. But my own perspective is shaped by interviews I conducted with Hmong directly in Lao, they spoke Lao of course and I spoke pretty good Lao at that time, and I'm persuaded that there was something the Vietnamese were using.

Q: As I recall there was something about our sending a team in, you know, special forces trying to get samples and you know, there was something, was this bee pollen and-



MCWILLIAMS: Well in point of fact none of us, I'm not aware of anyone going into Laos to collect samples. Essentially we did get samples because the Hmong would bring stuff across the Mekong for us. However Denny and I and Dr. Townsend did cross into Cambodia a number of times, this is at the point when it was Vietnamese controlled, to essentially take blood samples, urine samples, collect reports and so on, from not only the Khmer Rouge also some of the other, just simple peasants but also from some of the other anti-Vietnamese, the Sihanouk forces, the Son Sann forces and so on. So there were teams, well I was part of teams that went into Cambodia but we didn't go into Laos. And as I say, my feeling is that yes, ultimately we were on to something but unfortunately I think Washington only took it so far as to use it as a propaganda ploy against Hanoi and Moscow and therefore didn't really explore deeply enough. My view.

Q: Well then you were the Vietnam or the Indochina watcher but you had essentially Laos and Vietnam.

MCWILLIAMS: As well, yes.

Q: What were you picking up from the Vietnamese experience in Cambodia at the time?

MCWILLIAMS: I don't think much. Well again, Tim would have been doing a lot of that. My reporting tending to be more about the humanitarian concerns related to the Cambodian refugees. I think Tim, as the senior officer, would have done more with the regards to what's going on in Phnom Penh. My interests were more in the Cambodian politics, Son Sann's groups, Sihanouk's group and of course Khmer Rouge groups. We didn't have much contact with the Khmer Rouge except on the yellow rain issue. No, I can't say I worked very much on that question.

Q: Well were we, speaking of the groups you dealing with and the refugees, did you see-backing any groups, usually the refugees, that they sense. In other words that there seemed to be some, seemed to be going anywhere?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, there were a number of us who had some sense that we ought to be encouraging and assisting the forces of Son Sann and Sihanouk. Unfortunately at one point, this would have been probably early '82, then Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Oakley came out to a meeting of the Khmer elements that took place in Kuala Lumpur at which we essentially forced forged an alliance between Son Sann's people and Sihanouk's people and the Khmer Rouge. This was with the notion of battling the Vietnamese more successfully. That, I think, was ultimately a terrible mistake because essentially it soiled the image of Son Sann and Sihanouk by associating them with the Khmer Rouge who by that time everyone had recognized had been really beasts. It was, I think, a blunder and I think it set things back considerably because then the Vietnamese were able to say we're dealing with the Khmer Rouge and the whole notion that Sihanouk who had significant political support within the country and even Son Sann, who was a clean, good politician who had his own following, their political strength was tremendously weakened by the fact that we essentially forced them into an alliance with the Khmer Rouge. I think it was a terrible mistake.

Q: Do you have any feel for the genesis of all this happening?

MCWILLIAMS: I think it was the old anti-Hanoi desire to deal with these Vietnamese occupiers. It was a subordination of what should have been a very deep concern about human rights and the Khmer Rouge to a strategic perspective that we need to get these Cambodians together so that we can assist them better. And I should say after that, of course, then we began to see assistance moving into Cambodia to support the anti-Vietnamese side, this being assistance moving through the Thai and it was of course a secret at that time. But our assistance and I believe some assistance from others moving as I say through the aegis of the Thais we were able to get some assistance into the Khmer elements. And again, you have to remember that the principle element of the Khmer alliance, if it can be called that, against the Vietnamese, was the Khmer Rouge, they had the military power.

Q: What were you, I mean were the Hmong, were they just, everybody was against them in this?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, the Hmong is a very sad, sad story because of course they were not really welcome in Thailand. They were kept at a camp up in Ban Vinai, in a little camp outside of Nongkai and I believe one other campsite. But having to go up there very frequently, usually on weekends, I would take a bus up and then bus back on Monday morning, just interviewing these people, seeing the conditions in which they lived, hearing the stories and the problems they faced inside Laos, it was heart wrenching. And to remember that these were very critical allies to the U.S. forces and to see how they were left. The point being that many of them were stuck in these camps for many years in Thailand principally because their great leader, Vang Pao, who was in the United States and still had great influence over them, was very reluctant to see these refugees come to the United States. So we essentially collaborated in his strategy to sort of keep them on the border notwithstanding the Thais' interest in getting them off the border as a potential force for use again in Lao apparently. But it was a very sad result for these people.

Q: What were you getting from, I mean, were you part of the process of finding out what the Khmer Rouge had done?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes but there again I would have to say that Tim Carney was the principle political reporter. My interest was much more yellow rain but also looking at the humanitarian question of how the international community was responding to this tremendous flow of refugees out to the border.

Q: Was this a period of considerable exodus of boat people from Vietnam though?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

Q: Could you talk about what we were doing? I mean, because this is a pretty nasty time. I mean, people were coming but it wasn't the Thai government particularly but a lot of people were preying on them.



MCWILLIAMS: Well, if you remember the boat people were not simply coming to Thailand, some did, but many were landing in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and so on and I was not really a part of that policy development but obviously we were very anxious to encourage these countries to accept these refugees as countries of first asylum with the expectation that they would be moved on to countries of, you know, permanent asylum. My involvement with that was much more, again, as sort of an intelligence collector. I would visit the refugee camps in Thailand and pick up, try to get perspective, what was going on in Vietnam. I recall working very much on the MIA question, of course, but also I developed a line of reporting about what we called then the Vietnamese gulag, trying to determine what had happened to those Vietnamese who of course worked with us. And we developed I think a rather comprehensive set of reporting about prison camps in Vietnam, identifying them, talking about conditions at those camps, and I had the assistance of a young fellow, an intern, his name I can't recall who deserves a lot of credit for that, I can't recall his name now. But that reporting eventually was actually picked up because of course it was a propaganda angle to this as well and the Asia Wall Street Journal published a long report that was based on this about the Vietnamese gulag.

Q: Well, can you talk a bit about what you were getting about what was happening in Vietnam?

MCWILLIAMS: Well very clearly, I mean, the Vietnamese and Hanoi were being very effective in identifying and taking in for reeducation, it was called, certainly all of the Vietnamese who had worked with us but in addition they of course were very rough on the Viet Cong. Much of the Viet Cong leadership had been killed in Tet in 1968 but the Hanoi leadership saw the Viet Cong in some ways as being as much or more of a threat to their control than our allies because they had good popular support, the Viet Cong did, so you had Viet Cong being imprisoned but of course anyone who had worked with the United States would be taken off for reeducation and those who had held senior positions, of course, were in trouble. Many were killed. I think more important they were placed in camps where conditions were not only health threatening but life threatening and many died in those camps.

Q: Life threatening how?



MCWILLIAMS: Well in terms of provision of food, medical care, overwork, exposure to malaria. Very, very tough time for these people in the camps. And of course I think much of the impetus for the exodus of boat people was, certainly much of it was economic. I mean, the situation economic was very dire in South Vietnam but I think also and probably the more important impetus for movement of boat people was the threat to individuals or to the families of individuals who had worked for the Americans, remembering of course that while the father or the mother might be taken away to a reeducation camp the family members, the immediate family members were also under a cloud in terms of education, in getting jobs and so on. So it was a bad time in South Vietnam.

Q: Were you reporting on how the, while you were in Thailand, how the Thais were reacting to this?

MCWILLIAMS: Well of course my beat wasn't Thailand. I didn't really deal with Thai politics.

Q: I was wondering, but on the refugee side there were lots of stories about-

MCWILLIAMS: Oh, well yes, sure.

Q: Pushing boats off or seizing boats or raping the women or robbing and that sort of thing.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. Well, that certainly was a concern although I think that was a concern to some extent as well in other parts of the region. But one of the problems that developed for me at the embassy was that I was hearing and trying to report stories of Thai, particularly Thai military, mistreatment of Thai refugees as they came across, inadequate provision for them and so on. And I'm trying to remember details but that was, reporting it of course in some ways wasn't welcome because it was being critical of the Thai hosts. I think in general the embassy was inclined to give the Thai some benefit of the doubt, some leeway on these issues because Thailand's role was so critical, both politically and militarily in terms of getting supplies through to the fighting Khmer, but also simply in supporting the vast humanitarian project along their border.

Q: Did you have much contact as still a relatively junior officer in the embassy with the other officers there? I was wondering whether, you know, there was sort of a, particularly at the junior and mid-level often there's a feeling which may be among the officers somewhat at odds with the more senior officers, you know, things are going badly.



MCWILLIAMS: No, no. I think at that embassy, thanks to very, very good leadership you didn't really have a class structure despite the size of that embassy. When I came in Mort Abramowitz was the ambassador, Sheffie, I keep mentioning Abramowitz; she was almost an officer at the embassy. She knew more and was doing more about the humanitarian work on the border than perhaps anyone in the embassy. They were very, very- it was a very good leadership. Burt Levin was our DCM and they went out of their way to be close to officers and to clerical staff and to families and so on. It was a very tightly knit embassy despite being a very big embassy. Subsequent to that John Gunther Dean came in and replaced Abramowitz, a very different sort of man but at the same time a very good leader and I think the embassy responded very well to him.

I should mention one element that I think is important here. Unfortunately, although Mort Abramowitz and Burt Levin were extremely good officers within the embassy, their rather brusque style didn't go down well with the Thai. If anything I think Mort in particular was not terribly well appreciated by the Thai, who react as do a lot of the Asians culturally poorly to abrupt and brusque American presentations. There was a few finger wagging incidents. You don't do that to Asians and not expect to have a bad result. And I think as a consequence, despite his tremendous skill and dedication that Mort was not as effective as an ambassador as in some ways Ambassador Dean was. John Gunther Dean came from a different tradition, very much a Europeanist and very cultivated, and...

Just one other aspect of that, I recall as Mort Abramowitz left very highly regarded in Washington because he'd handled a very difficult tour extremely well, was to be rewarded by getting an ambassadorship in Indonesia. And he didn't get it because essentially the Indonesians said they didn't want him. The street story back in Washington initially was that the Indonesians had rejected him because he was Jewish. I know for, I know quite securely that in fact he was rejected because the Thais warned the Indonesians that he was a difficult ambassador, that he would insist on things very strongly. I've always thought in retrospect, having subsequently gone to Indonesia that this is unfortunate in many ways because I think Mort Abramowitz in the early Suharto years, well middle Suharto years would have been a very good ambassador to have had there because he would have, I think, been tough. And unfortunately we had a string of ambassadors in Indonesia who basically went along with the Suharto regime and did not question some things the Suharto regime was doing. I think Mort, given his instinct for human rights and so on would have been a very useful man to have had there. Unfortunately he didn't get that job.

Q: Could you talk a bit about your impressions about the various non-governmental organizations that were dealing with refugees particularly in your bailiwick and all, you know, affected this? You know, their attitude, relations with the embassy, that sort of thing.



MCWILLIAMS: Basically there were, I think the assemblage of people that wound up on the border really a motley crew, a lot of strange personalities but I think largely very much dedicated to helping the Khmer. I had great respect for all the organizations. I can't remember really there being a bad one out there. I should mention though there was one relationship problem and that was it became clear to everyone working on the border that there was more than just humanitarian assistance going on there, that the CIA or somebody was there and that in fact arms were moving across the border and so on and as a consequence I think a lot of the NGOs, many of them American citizens, of course, and the press out there were suspicious and skeptical of the U.S. presence on the border. And I know a lot of us and certainly I myself, particularly because I was interested in what was going on and getting intelligence, assumed that many of us in fact were CIA when in fact of course we weren't. But that impeded the relationship to some extent with the NGOs but I must say from my perspective I had a lot of respect for what they accomplished.

Q: Well then, you left there in 19-

MCWILLIAMS: Let me just touch one other issue because I think it's important. I mentioned MIA things, MIA information. I was also very interested in picking up MIA information because it had been very important when I had been in Washington, I knew how important it was in our policy. And I recall, particularly talking with Vietnamese boat people, a number of reports that I got that to me sounded quite credible about live sightings and when I got back to the embassy I was required to provide all of my reporting on these topics to a special office within the defense attaché's office. And I subsequently found out that much of that reporting never left the embassy and that's always bothered me and confused me, that much of what I got was not passed on and it's always left me a little bit concerned.

Q: You have any idea why?

MCWILLIAMS: I don't know. I really don't know. But it was a factor that bothered me a bit. I should say also at the very end of the tour I had, because of essentially too many trips into Cambodia I had picked up two cases of malaria, sort of a double malaria, one of which they treated and one which they didn't know I had so I had a long bout of malarial problems and I had dysentery so my last four or five months there I was still traveling but I was less effective than I would have liked to have been simply because I was very weak. But it was a great tour and it was the first award I picked up, they gave me a superior honor award out there, and it was a very interesting tour.

I had great colleagues. I mentioned Denny Lane and Colonel, former Colonel Amos Townsend, some very good people that I worked with. And I must say I had great respect for the leadership I saw there, both in Ambassador Abramowitz, Burt Levin and John Gunther Dean.



Q: Well then, you left in '82?

MCWILLIAMS: Right, middle of '82.

Q: Whither?

MCWILLIAMS: Went into Russian language training and on to Moscow.

Q: How did you find Russian?

MCWILLIAMS: Hard. Not as hard as Vietnamese but it was a tough language but it was a long- it was basically a course on culture and language, a pretty good language program I thought, although the language department in Russian at that point was sort in the middle of a civil war and I don't know if that ever concluded but there were sort of two banks of teachers and it was always difficult, I think frankly very difficult for a number of us to sort of navigate the politics of the Russian language department and still get an education. But in some ways it was also an introduction to the kind of politics we met in Moscow.

Q: I took Russian in 1951.

MCWILLIAMS: Wow.

Q: At Army Language School and we, at that time, that goes way back but we had a fight between those who left sort of with the White Armies and those who had left after World War II.

MCWILLIAMS: I can tell you the fight, at least by that time had not ended. You still had fights over terminology, you know, they don't use that kind of language anymore. But it was a good experience because I think notwithstanding the fact of the problems in the language department we had very strong personalities who helped us understand the personality, not just the culture but the personality of Russians and I think that was very useful for the two-year tour there in Russia.

Q: No, I often- one often develops from the language thing what you're getting into.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, exactly, very much so because you get the culture. And as I say not just culture but personalities are very interesting.

Q: Well you served in Moscow from when to when?

MCWILLIAMS: This would have been summer of '83 to summer to summer of '85.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MCWILLIAMS: Mr.- Arthur Hartman. Again, I keep saying this but just one hell of a good man, a hell of an ambassador, a hell of a good man. And our first DCM was Warren Zimmerman, the late Warren Zimmerman who also was a superb officer.

Q: Warren and I served together in Yugoslavia.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh well.

Q: When he was a junior officer, I was a mid-career officer.

MCWILLIAMS: Well but then he subsequently served as ambassador.

Q: He went back there as ambassador. I knew when he was number three or four in the political sector.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, one of the real heroes, as is Art Hartman, who I understand is still quite active.

Q: I talked to him last week.

MCWILLIAMS: Is that right?

Q: I've interviewed him once and he wants to be re-interviewed so I've got to give him a call.



MCWILLIAMS: No, he's, once again, it's something that I didn't see subsequently in many embassies but there was almost a family feeling, as there was in Bangkok because of the personality of the ambassador and of course Ambassador Hartman's wife was a great figure in the embassy as well.

Q: What was your job?

MCWILLIAMS: I was a political officer. I was given, frankly, I thought a rather uninteresting job. I was the publications officer and I ran the language program which meant I had to basically run, I think at that time, nine ladies, Russian ladies who were doing our teaching. That was a very interesting job too. But it was interesting only in bureaucratic sense and I sought something more interesting and fortunately was able to work as sort of a deputy assistant sidekick to the human rights officer, John Purnell, now ambassador out in Uzbekistan, a superb officer although not at that time very senior who taught me a lot. And the human rights portfolio was, I think as I look back on my career one of the most interesting things I've ever done.

Q: Well, I mean, here you'd been really a South Asian hand, very much a South Asian hand. A Southeast Asian.

MCWILLIAMS: Southeast Asian, right.

Q: How did you find, did you feel you were entering somebody else's club when you got over there?

MCWILLIAMS: Very much so. You- I keep saying you remember but you probably know well, there are clubs in the Foreign Service and the Russian club is one of the biggest and one of the most important, one of the most powerful and also the China club, and it became clear as a junior member of that club that it was necessary to perform well and to fit in so that you could become a full fledged member of the club and thereby be able to aspire to other assignments in the Russian sphere. I'm sure this works as well, as I say the China sphere was important as well. I didn't have any particular strong desire to remain in that club. I still felt myself very much an Asianist. I for example petitioned for and got responsibility for reporting on Central Asia which was a lot of fun which meant a lot of travel out to Central Asia. I think I didn't aspire to me a member of that so I didn't feel the constraints of sort of living up to other peoples' expectations as being a good Russianist.

Q: When you got there in '83 how were relations with the Soviet Union? Ronald Reagan was in power then but, I mean, what was?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, not good, obviously. Brezhnev had just died and we had Chernenko-

Q: Had Chernenko and then Andropov.

MCWILLIAMS: had just moved in. Andropov, excuse me. Excuse me. Andropov first and that was important.

Q: Well they came and went so quickly.

MCWILLIAMS: They did. That was a bad period. We saw a lot of leadership change. But Andropov was interesting, just to say quickly because, he died of course, very quickly, I think less than a year, I don't recall exactly, but I recall my teachers, who were all old World War II veterans, very committed but very friendly and open to Americans but nonetheless had their own perspectives about life in the Soviet Union, very much Russians, I can recall when Andropov died tremendous gnashing of teeth and sadness and weeping over his death among this cadre of Russians whom I thought I knew pretty well. And they explained to me that they had felt at the time that he seemed to be the first real Soviet leader who offered hope for renewal and reform even though he came from a KGB background, even though he was rumored to be Jewish, have Jewish blood. Tremendous sense of loss there that wasn't apparently the case with Brezhnev's loss or Chernenko's loss. He was quite a figure.

Anyway. You asked about the relationship. It was not good obviously. We were into the propaganda mode and I must admit much of my human rights work, although it became pretty genuine, pretty sincere in terms of trying to help these people, the dissidents and refuseniks and so on, there was much of it that was propaganda, essentially, you know, revealing the dastard Soviet handling of individuals and so on.

Q: It was more just exposing.

MCWILLIAMS: There was a lot of that, I think that was much of it but very frankly I think partly under John's, John Purnell's leadership inevitably you became affected by the suffering of these dissidents and refuseniks such that much of the job was bringing them medicines and getting food stuffs through to them and getting books to them and so on so that you became very personally involved with these people as well.

Q: In this, the refuseniks, how much of this would you say was basically centered on the Jewish Soviets as opposed to, you know, sort of the Slavic Soviet dissidents?



MCWILLIAMS: I think much of it was focused on the Jewish Soviets as you call them, the refuseniks mostly. This was a reflection of the fact that in the United States and elsewhere, also in Europe, there was a very tight and effective organization of Jewish groups, groups of American Jews and others who were concerned about the fate of Soviet Jewry and that obviously was of great interest. I can recall on numerous occasion there'd be a problem that something would have happened to one of the principle Jewish refuseniks, either in a prison camp or somewhere, and the report would be picked up in Washington before it was picked up in Moscow and of course that would leave us sort of flat footed. So we were very aggressive in trying to learn what was happening to these people. And to be very frank we were doing more than that. I recall, for example with Roman Catholics up in Lithuania there was a thing called the Lithuanian Chronicle which came out monthly and would be published in the West to reveal what was going on for the Catholics up there in the Baltics. And I guess we can say this now the information, actually microfiche, microfilm would be passed through us. And it was sort of a wink-wink, nudge-nudge thing, not officially known or even done in the embassy but it would go out through diplomatic pouch. And it was very interesting.

Let me just describe the scene a little bit. Every Saturday night outside one of the major synagogues in Moscow you'd have an assemblage of refuseniks but also Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Slavic Russophiles and so on would come to this one point at night and diplomats, really just the Americans and usually the Canadians, occasionally a Brit and a few journalists would come to this conglomeration and maybe a couple of hundred, maybe as little as maybe 20 or 30 and we would simply mingle in the street and exchange information. And of course mixed in that group would be KGB trying to interrupt conversations and so on. Extremely interesting scrum. I recall one of my early visits out there some KGB fellow had come out and there was a fellow with him with one of these old hand cameras with the big flash disk and any time one of the refuseniks would come up to speak to one of the Westerners they'd rush right over and take their picture. And this was of course interrupting the work of collecting information and so on because it was intimidating the hell out of the Russians, the Jews and so on. So Jon Purnell and I were there, John had great Russian, I had pretty poor Russian and he was the lead man so I volunteered to sort of interrupt this process and I decided to become this KGB guy's very best friend. So I basically linked arms with him and just started walking with him and talking with him in my lousy Russian and every time they moved in to take a picture they got me because I jumped right in front of the camera. And the Jews, who have a great sense of humor, thought this was funny as hell. And because I was obviously blocking their operation and at one point they begin to get physical with me and sort of started to push me back and so on and foolishly I pushed them back and I was described as a hooligan and they started berating me as if the police were going to come and pick me up. But ultimately some of the young refuseniks decided they were going to play this game too so they started harassing them and surrounding them and so on and essentially chased them off. And it was a great memory.



I can remember one other incident related to that. I recall after having walked back to our car getting pushed around, we were assaulted. Jon had gotten into the car and one of the other members of our team had gotten into the car, there were three of us that night, and I was left sort of- it was my car- walking around to the driver's seat and I was accosted by some four or five Russians who started thrashing me about. And all of them smelled of liquor but I think that was a ruse, I don't think they were drunk at all. But basically tough tactics. And I got back into the car pretty shaken and the guys in the car who had watched this go on were pretty shaken up. And we were slow to report this to the embassy and we finally- this would be a Saturday night- like on Tuesday or Wednesday we told Ambassador Hartman what had happened and Warren Zimmerman and Warren went berserk. He described the incident as "Nazi tactics". He was very pissed that we'd been slow in reporting this to them. But that next Saturday night we were out there, he said you've got to go back, and as we were standing there here comes the ambassador's car right into this mix in front of the synagogue with the flags flying and out jumps Warren Zimmerman, not the Ambassador, but he was going through the crowd shaking hands, meeting with people as a demonstration that U.S. embassy people were not going to be pushed around like this. So he was a great man, Warren Zimmerman.

I'm sorry I relate these stories but they're for me very memorable..

Q: Oh no, no, no, I think it's very important.

MCWILLIAMS: They give you a sense of community that we had.

Q: They give you a sense there. Did, while you were there you say you were talking, you had sort of the Asian types which later became the Stans.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, etcetera.

MCWILLIAMS: Right.

Q: Did you get any feel for the difference, I mean, the belongingness to the Soviet Union or the non-belongingness to the Soviet Union? What were you coming away with?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. No, very much so. I mean, to be fair we were reading the very good literature that was coming out in the United States and Europe about Central Asia and other parts of the Soviet Union. There was a sense that things were beginning to foment, there was foment out there that it was beginning to possibly break up a bit. So particularly in the Stans where I spent quite a bit of time I was interested in Islam and the Soviet control mechanisms and so on, I recall one of the things that I picked up that I think was true, I picked up a lot things that I think weren't true, but at the time in a number of the Stans and I think elsewhere actually, I was in the Caucasuses as well, it was brought- local people would tell me that they didn't really have problems with the Russians so much or even the Soviet rule and so on, this is Islamics and so on, that a lot of the difficulty they had were with other minority groups within their own country, Uzbeks versus Tajiks, Uzbeks versus Kyrgyzs for example. And that the Russians were there sort of as the referees and that they would appeal to Russians essentially on behalf of their ethnic groups. And that struck me as a little bit surprising because I would have thought, of course, sort of growing feeling against Moscow and so on but in point of fact in a number of occasions, a number of conversations I recall the local people saying no, we need the Russians to keep us apart from each other. Just an interesting perspective.

Q: Well, I know too that I went, after I retired, I spent three weeks in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan in the mid-'90s. And there it was apparent that the Soviets, the Russians were essentially a plus to the place because they had brought helicopter factories all of which kind of shut down after the Soviet empire broke up. The Soviets were putting quite a bit of money and all into these places.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh, very much so.

Q: They were not milking or oppressing.

MCWILLIAMS: Well they clearly had milked, you can talk about how they perverted Uzbekistan's agriculture by insisting that they grow cotton and so on and terrible engineering projects which have damaged the ecology in Kazakhstan, for example, in Tajikistan. But just jumping ahead a little bit, I opened the embassy in Bishkek, of course, and opened the embassy in Dushanbe so I saw how- what the Russian rule had been and indeed, you speak of the health system, there wouldn't have been a health system, of course, without not only Soviet money but Russians populating it also Germans and also Georgians, no not Georgians.

Q: We're talking about the Volga Germans.



MCWILLIAMS: Volga Germans, yes of course. Ukrainians, who were very important and Jews who were very important in the provision of services, particularly health services. And I can tell you not so much in Kyrgyzstan because I was only there six weeks but over almost two-and-a-half years in Dushanbe one of the great tragedies in the early part of that tour was because of the civil war in Tajikistan many of these people are Russians and the Jews, certainly, Ukrainians, left and as a consequence what had been a decent medical structure basically collapsed. And of course the money wasn't there either, coming from Moscow.

Q: Did you, while you were in the Soviet Union, did you get any feel of the enormity of the lack of strong economic sense of progress or something? I mean, you know, with communications? You know, the Soviet system later was shown to be riddled with defects.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think actually my first lesson in that context was when I flew in before I even landed. When you flew into Moscow, and this was like in '83, all you see in this long, low approach are dirt roads. Until you really get to Moscow and then you saw paved roads. And it was always striking to me that, you know, if we were flying into Washington we wouldn't be flying over dirt roads. But essentially you had these islands of development and vast areas of underdevelopment and poverty. And of course because I traveled extensively being the publications officer I was out almost every week buying books in strange places which of course to some extent was cover to report, obviously. But you got to see little holes. And what I used to do in my traveling was I would go to the capital of a republic and some other place. And these some other places that I saw just were horrendous.

I recall visiting a place called Magnitogorsk.

Q: What?

MCWILLIAMS: Magnitogorsk. Which is in southern Russia. And as we approached, the airport was like 45, 50 miles from the city. As we approached the city, this long, flat plain, I saw one mountain. And I said well that's interesting, that's an interesting feature, what is that mountain that we're approaching? Well that was in fact a dome of pollution over Magnitogorsk. And as we rode into Magnitogorsk- and it was sort of purplish- as we rode into Magnitogorsk and as I was there a couple of days, we'd see vehicles going around with sirens and it was basically to alert people to go indoors because the pollution levels were too dangerous for them to be out of doors. I mean, this is what, the incredible problems that the Soviet Union was facing in those days. It's almost surprising that it limped along as long as it did.



Q: Well this brings to mind sort of the incredible thing that we have this tremendous apparatus of the embassy, the CIA, analysts everywhere else and yet when push came to shove, this would be a decade later, we completely missed the collapse of the Soviet empire. You know, when you look at it very few people were saying this can't last. Were you picking up any of this?

MCWILLIAMS: There were academics who were doing very good research in the middle '80s that I think were pointing towards this. But no, I think frankly, again this wasn't really my beat, I was working human rights, that was the only political angle I had, although to be fair, there were some of the, particularly some of the Jewish scientists that we were in touch with who were giving us rather bleak perspectives on the future of the Soviet Union, I think myself being fairly ignorant, I think, in those days, tended to think well, they're just speaking against the Soviet Union and so on, I'm not going to take that too seriously, but some of these scientists had worked within the structure for many years during the Khrushchev period and so on, they were allowed to advance, and they, I think, themselves were seeing that things were reaching a terminal point.

Q: The publications officer, I've talked to other people, mostly in an earlier period, used to say it was great fun to go to these book stores.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, oh yes.

Q: And then in a way you had this push and shove that certain books weren't supposed to be available to you but many of the bookstore dealers wanted to sell because, I don't know, I mean.

MCWILLIAMS: No. My experience was a little different. I was always impressed with the absence of any commercial interest in these people. You had to get their attention. They were too busy doing their nails and so on. What I would do, and this was a policy, I think my predecessor also followed, you'd bring in catalogs, U.S. catalogs, Sears and so on or more importantly women's fashion catalogs, and always bring a batch of them with you because usually ladies running these shops loved to get these things just to paw through them, and sometimes little gifts of nail polish and so on. And that could win you assistance, not a great deal of assistance, obviously no one was going to spy against their government for a bottle of nail polish but they would occasionally draw your attention to a new book that's just come out or let you know that they've only got a few copies of this and this one might be interesting. But for the most part there wasn't a great deal of cooperation in that venue. Frankly it was a physically hard job because travel in the Soviet Union was just rigorous but lugging, you had to basically pick up what you'd bought and lugging, you know, a trash bag full of books around, it was just hard, hard work sometimes.



Q: What sort of books were you looking for?

MCWILLIAMS: Well we had very specific requests from a whole variety of agencies back here in Washington. And I think there's like over 30 different organizations we were buying for. And each one sort of set out what it was, the kinds of books they'd want. And it was a great variety and indeed it required you to have a working understanding of what aspects of Soviet science was sufficiently advanced as to be interesting to U.S. scientists. It also required a certain ability to quickly scan-I think my reading Russian was a lot better than my speaking Russian-to scan what was in the book and so on. But it was not interesting, it was drudgery but it enabled me to travel and I enjoyed the work actually.

Q: Did you find, when you were traveling here, were you, did you have problems with the local KGB, you know, well, harassment or anything like that?

MCWILLIAMS: Not really harassment but I think often, you know, you'd be the only Westerner in the city and the tailing was always there and you sort of accepted that. It made a little bit difficult your efforts to sort of pick up information so that you wound up relying on taxicab drivers but often there'd be a particular taxicab driver who seemed always to be your taxicab driver so. But it made it sort of a game and I think over time the Soviet intelligence realized who I was and that I was pretty innocuous. So yes, it was always there but it was not really. I can't recall any incidents where they were, posed difficulties for our movement and travel.

Q: What about, you know, staying at a hotel? Could you sit and talk to other people or were you-?

MCWILLIAMS: You'd try to, you know, you'd try to do that at dinner tables and so on, you'd try to sit with someone but you know, always in the back of our minds, particularly having worked the beat seriously in Moscow you didn't want to jeopardize anyone. And if someone, frankly if someone came up and wanted to talk to you two things flashed through your mind. One, this is a deal, particularly if they want to pass you any paper, that this could be a ruse. Or this person's going to hurt himself, they don't know what they're doing. So you had to be very cautious, very cautious.

Q: Well you left there when?

MCWILLIAMS: I left in '85, summer of '85.

Q: Where'd you go?



MCWILLIAMS: Into training for a posting in Kabul, into Dari training.

Q: Okay, I think this is probably a good place to stop.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Very good.

Q: So we'll pick this up in 1980-

MCWILLIAMS: Well, '85 leaving there and then '86 would be the Kabul assignment.

Q: Okay, we'll talk a little about the language and then doing that, going to Kabul. Great.

Okay. Today is the 29th of December, 2005. I think it's Holy Innocents' Day.

MCWILLIAMS: I guess you got me there. I didn't know that.

Q: So '85. How did you find, first place, why Dari? Is Dari and Farsi the same language or not?

MCWILLIAMS: It's similar. You can generally, if you're a good speaker of either you can understand the other one. But Farsi is the more elevated one. For example, when I would speak my Farsi influenced Dari in the markets in Kabul they would refer to me as a mullah because I spoke at an elevated level. It's interesting because I, we'll talk about it later, but I then went on to Tajikistan which speaks a variant of Dari so you have Farsi, Dari and Tajik, all very closely related but different, different dialects.

Q: Well then, I mean, but Dari was considered the-

MCWILLIAMS: It was the lingua franca of Afghanistan.

Q: It was the language.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. The other language was Pashtun and I actually had a colleague, a deputy, David Katz, who had not only Dari and some Pashtun but also spoke Nuristani, which is a very minor dialect. He'd been in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan so I was always very impressed with anybody that had both languages. Another Foreign Services officer, Brad Hanson, has both Pashtun and Dari and speaks them both very well. I've always been impressed with that.

Q: Well then, how did you find the language as far as something to tackle and to learn?

MCWILLIAMS: It wasn't a terribly difficult language. Of course you had the script, you have Arabic script, and that was a bit of a challenge although I had a very good teacher and it was one-on-one training, which can be pretty rigorous because frankly one-on-one it's pretty intense.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: But I had six months of that and as I recall I got a 3+/3 although I think that was a bit generous but it was enough to get me in.

Q: Well, you got to Kabul when?

MCWILLIAMS: Probably June or July, June of '86 I guess it was.

Q: And you were there until when?

MCWILLIAMS: Until June or July of '88.

Q: What was your job?

MCWILLIAMS: I was the acting DCM. We didn't have an ambassador because of the special relationship we had with Afghanistan at that stage, this is the Soviet-controlled regime. So I was the number two but not a formal DCM, was acting DCM.

Q: Okay, would you kind of describe what was the situation in Afghanistan at the time you got there in '86?



MCWILLIAMS: Well it was, obviously it was a Soviet occupied state and we as members of the embassy were not allowed to leave the capital of Kabul, which was very constraining over two years, basically living just in the city. It had a fairly large Western diplomatic presence. It was an unusual relationship, though, with the government because we didn't formally recognize the Najibullah government. We had, all of us, the Western embassies, had relations only with the foreign ministry. You couldn't call on any other ministry of government so it was a very limited relationship and our responsibilities very frankly were to monitor the Soviet presence and the Najibullah, well actually it was Babrak Karmal when it came in but the Soviet influenced regime there. And in a real sense to be propagandists, that is, we would collect information obviously for intelligence reasons but also for the purpose of insuring that the international media were aware of what was going on in Afghanistan so that when there was a particularly brutal Soviet atrocity we'd make sure that got out, some failing of the regime we'd make sure that got out. Anything that suggested that the Soviet occupation was being resisted by the people of Afghanistan was something that we would attempt to get to the international media.

Q: What was happening in the field at the time when you got there?

MCWILLIAMS: It was actually a moment of transition because up until say '85, mid-'86 when I arrived the Soviets had pretty solid control of the country. What changed in '86 actually was the introduction of the Stinger missile. And there had been great debate in Washington as to whether or not the mujahideen should be given the Stinger missiles and the anti-aircraft missile which is very effective, state-of-the-art at the time. And the decision was made in summer of '86 to give them that weapon and that changed the dynamics of the military conflicts significantly because up until that time the Soviets had relied very heavily on helicopter lift to move troops and move supplies and so on and it gave them pretty good access to the entire country. However, with the introduction of the Stinger the muj were able to deny significant areas to Soviet penetration and Soviet control simply by making known to the Soviets that in fact a particular valley was defended by Stingers and that would keep them from moving their area assets, particularly helicopters, into those areas. So it was a very significant change in the dynamics of the military confrontation.

Q: Well before we get to that, I'm sure everybody sat around trying to figure this out and maybe we discussed the last time but what, when you got to our embassy there, what was the analysis of why the hell the Soviets did what they did in December of '79?



MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes. Well that's a fairly basic question. There's two lines of analysis, one that would suggest that the Brezhnev leadership saw an opportunity to penetrate into Southwestern Asia and simply took that opportunity. There's another line of analysis which is a bit more sophisticated which I think I would lean toward which is to say that there was an intramural struggle within the communist party of Afghanistan, a division, and one, the more radical element of that communist party in Afghanistan moved abruptly to displace the existing leadership which in fact was cooperating to some extent with Moscow and in so doing became a client state of Moscow. But I think to some extent perhaps not with Moscow's planning or intention but once it established itself Moscow felt committed to supporting that regime. Ultimately what Moscow did and this was in the first year really was to remove the failing wing of the communist party, failing in the sense that it wasn't really establishing itself because it was so radical, and to replace that wing with a more popular communist element which did survive for a number of years obviously. But I think it's still a question for historians to grapple with as to why the Soviets moved in when and as they did.

Q: I would think that you arrived and the Stingers were there. I mean, had arrived.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, they were just being introduced when I arrived so I remember that was one of the things that was an early theme in my reporting. Essentially we were a reporting machine out there and one of the principle objections we had was to determine whether or not the Stingers were having an effect and our assessment was that they indeed were.

Q: I would have thought that the introduction of Stingers would have made relations between our embassy, well America and the Soviets there and the party in power absolutely poisonous.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. They were essentially. I guess though to sort of tell tales the embassy up until I think '86 had been a fairly innocuous institution. I think this reflected first of all the leadership of that institution which to my mind wasn't as effective as it might have been but more importantly I think Washington didn't really conceive of the battle in Afghanistan as anything more than an effort to bleed the Soviets. I don't think anyone in Washington up until the introduction of the Stingers really anticipated that the Soviets could be defeated in Afghanistan and I think beginning in '86 we began to see things differently. So up until that time obviously the U.S. embassy and the other Western embassies were a maligned presence but they served Soviet interests by essentially enabling the Soviets to say well look, we have a going regime here that even has Western embassies. So it served a propaganda purpose for them. Beginning in '86, thanks to the Stingers certainly but also I think our posture at the embassy became a lot more aggressive and yes, there were some difficult moments as a consequence of the introduction of Stingers, our more aggressive posture and the fact that the Soviets, I think, began to see that indeed they didn't have a winning hand in Afghanistan.



Q: Well had we, I mean, in a way, the Stinger began to negate sort of this, but didn't we see the Soviets being the way that you would often portrayed in the American press, you know, a big red arrow pointed towards one India, two the Gulf states, to Iran, you know, I mean, you know, part of the great game.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes.

Q: I mean, but did we see the Soviets have this in mind?

MCWILLIAMS: Let me just back- I thought you were going to go as to the Washington perception. Very clearly Washington saw the Soviet penetration of Afghanistan as a direct threat to Pakistan which was not a strong regime and obviously its penetration would be a very serious loss for the U. S. in that region. But in terms of the Soviets ambitions, in the final analysis my sense is that they probably didn't perceive themselves as using Afghanistan as a stepping stone. That may have been in the mind of some Soviet dreamers but I think given the problems they faced in Afghanistan, particularly in the middle to late '80s, a venture beyond Afghanistan into Pakistan was unrealistic. Now that having been said I think in the death throes of the Najibullah regime, the Soviet presence, the Soviets clearly did try to intimidate Pakistan, the use of Scuds, these long-range missiles and so on. But I think this was not so much an effort to actually make gains in Pakistan but rather just an attempt to warn Pakistan to step back from what became a full throttle support for the mujahideen.

Q: You say that we were monitoring how the Stingers were doing. Where did we get our information?

MCWILLIAMS: It was very difficult. The diplomatic circuit, the Western diplomatic circuit which by the way included the Chinese, shared information on a regular basis and each embassy had its own network of contacts that would let us know, give us some sense of what was going on outside. For example, I relied very much on rug merchants because notwithstanding the war the rug sales went on and these rug merchants would be getting rugs in from the countryside and as these rugs would be brought in obviously these sellers would sit down with the rug merchants...

Q: This is tape three, side one with Ed McWilliams. You were talking about the rug merchants.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, in addition to, as I say, getting information off what was a fairly busy diplomatic net we, I relied on rug merchants who, because of their regular contact with people coming in from the countryside to bring rugs for sale through these merchants had a pretty good sense of what was going on outside of Kabul. But in addition to that I think one of the principle things we did was simply to monitor what the Soviets were doing in Kabul. There was a great deal of Soviet equipment in Kabul and as, particularly with the introduction of the Stingers and so on, the Soviets sought to adapt their military to these new threats and they were doing some very interesting things in terms of protecting their equipment. And one of our jobs out there was really pure intelligence, was simply to monitor changes in the Soviet equipment, what they were introducing for the first time, the BTR-80 as I recall was first introduced out there.

Q: What is that?

MCWILLIAMS: It's an armored personnel carrier. But as it happened and I guess I can speak about these in general terms, there was one other agency of government out there whose responsibility was more in this line to monitor changes in Soviet equipment and tactics. And because their numbers were reduced significantly at one point, I can discuss later, I was pulled in to do essentially ground work. My colleague was doing changes in air tactics and protection for air and I was doing ground stuff, which involved photography and simply taking notes. Also, as Kabul was really the base of operations for the Soviets, we would frequently encounter massive Soviet convoys leaving Kabul to go off and do battle and one of the things we would do, again this was much more on the intelligence side than the propaganda side, was monitor what was in those convoys, number of vehicles, type of vehicles, and also the routes they were taking out of town because the very limited nature of the road network in Kabul, when you saw a major convoy leaving on a certain road you would track it until it basically left the environs of the city and you could tell generally what direction it was going. This information would be fed back to our embassy in Pakistan particularly, and I have to assume that this information was fairly regularly shared with the mujahideen.

Q: Did you find that you were being monitored, harassed, shadowed, doing something?

MCWILLIAMS: Sure, sure.

Q: By whom?



MCWILLIAMS: Soviets. Well, I should say the Najibullah regime as well. They would track us in their cars and so on but we had several confrontations with the Soviet troops. I was fired on twice and at one point pulled out of my car and roughed up a bit. But this was just prior to a Gorbachev-Reagan summit so nothing was made of that one. But I should say that the shooting incidents basically entailed my driving at night by a Soviet base and missing a checkpoint. And then on another occasion I had actually gone behind the base to do some photography, something that was new and I was fired on as I left.

Q: Well now, again, let's talk about the embassy a bit. I mean, you say you were sort of the quasi-DCM. Who was the quasi-ambassador?

MCWILLIAMS: We had a chargé<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> d'affaires.

Q: Chargé<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>.

MCWILLIAMS: And Maurice Elam was the first chargé<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> d'affaires and Glassman, John Glassman was the second chargé<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> d'affaires. I won't go into great detail but the predecessors for Mr. Elam had not been very much interested in morale in what was in fact a very, very difficult post. Obviously there were no families available, there was constant monitoring and some harassment of personnel. It was a very small embassy and morale obviously in a situation like that is going to be difficult. Mr. Elam's predecessors were not very much focused on that aspect of it. And Mr. Elam, an old Oklahoma cowboy, sort of an iconic figure, chewed on a cheroot which he never lit, wore cowboy boots and a cowboy hat and so on, very taciturn, sort of a Gary Cooper type, very unassuming but in his own way very intelligent but he focused on the need for morale and he was almost obsessive to make sure that everybody was doing okay. He was concerned about the mails, concerned that people were able to use his swimming pool, which his predecessor had basically made off limits to the staff. He was just a wonderful man, in a sense really a father figure for the entire embassy. And it was a unique element of leadership from my perspective because I think the man genuinely did care about this staff. But he was also a very cautious man, which I think was appropriate, and although I never really gave him much credit for analysis, I did most of the analysis, most of the reporting, on a number of occasions he would sit down for example and brief Western reporters when they could get in. And I remember the first time he did this with his boots, his cowboy boots up on the desk, giving an analysis without notes which was, a briefing, which was simply superb, and I saw him in a new light after that. He basically feigned to be sort of just a rough, tough, simple cowboy but the man had a really good mind. He was a great leader.

Q: Well, how did we see, you know, from '86 to '88, how were things developing? What were you picking up?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, what was most interesting to me, I think, was what I wasn't picking up. We were monitoring pretty steady gains by the mujahideen, getting back valleys, actually moving some refugees from Pakistan back into Afghanistan because they now controlled some of these valleys. What I was missing and this was really a flaw and a failure on my part, was the relationship among the mujahideen, who there were seven different principle mujahideen groups, eight if you count, and you should count the Hazaras. What I got glimpses of was some of the backbiting, the fighting between the fundamentalist groups and the more royalist, democratic oriented groups. On a couple of occasions I actually reported that, these disputes between Massoud, for example in Gbadeen and received very pained responses from our embassy in Pakistan that they really didn't want to see too much more of this kind of reporting, particularly reporting that would reach the media because it suggested rivalries and fighting between mujahideen groups. And I think very foolishly and unprofessionally I allowed myself to be swayed by the arguments well, you know, we're in this for the fight here and we don't want to be getting any bad propaganda out. The thing is we couldn't even report this in classified channels because they just didn't want that sort of information in Pakistan. And when I say they I mean the embassy and CIA basically.

Q: Yes, CIA, yes. Well, I mean, this is, of course, a problem that we've had everywhere with regimes. I go back to my Vietnam experience and all, you know, it's the same thing because, and you miss something if you don't get it. But the problem is if you talk about this, send it in no matter how classified it is, it will end up on a congressman's desk.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Who has his own or her own agenda.

MCWILLIAMS: And might use it in ways- But I think the point being, from my perspective what I learned and it's rather late in my career to be learning this, is that often bad news is as important or more important than good news.

Q: Oh yes.

MCWILLIAMS: And I think frankly, although I had both a meritorious award and a superior honor award out of these years in Kabul, I feel that I really failed in that assignment because I didn't report the real story and what came to be perhaps the most important story which was to say the fact the mujahideen were not cooperating and there was a fundamental flaw within our ally, the mujahideen, and that was the political differences among them.



Q: Well were we picking up things which would become more apparent after we put our own troops in about the people can, the mujahideen can be, you know, different groups can be bought? I mean, were the Soviets playing the game? Were they able to do that?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I mean, well obviously, I mean, the Soviets had Afghans who were working for them, the communist parties, really one communist party but two factions. So yes, I mean, they certainly had people working for them but I think, you know, this whole notion that Afghans, as they used to say, they can't be bought but they can be rented. In point of fact though, inasmuch as the Afghans were faced with a foreign occupier, an atheistic foreign occupier by the way, I think most Afghans were united in the determination to get rid of the Soviets. The trouble came in that each one of them, each party, each group, had an agenda beyond that that was essentially to avail themselves of the labors of power once the Soviets were thrown out. And I think we weren't looking to that.

Q: Well you know, looking at it from your point of view, you're on one side of the front in a way.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: And you're working, you know, what are the Soviets up to and their allies? But it would be our embassy and the CIA who were practically sleeping with the Afghan leaders and Pakistanis across the border and I guess our agents were going across too. I mean, they would be the ones who would pick this up but you picked this up.

MCWILLIAMS: The failing was principally there. And you're right, I mean, sitting sort of on the other side of the front you were very limited in what you could do. For example, we had virtually no contact with mujahideen that would be coming into the city, for example. But on the other hand we did manage, a couple of times, to pick up, I remember specifically a report on fighting between Masood's people and Gulbadin's people. And where I erred was not in accepting the direction from essentially Islamabad to restrain my reporting on that sort of thing. You should never limit your reporting. If you've got it as fact it should go out. In a classified channel in some form, of course there's a chance of leak as you suggest, but it was not that I was insufficiently aggressive in seeking this information out but when it came to me I should have been reporting it and I held back. And that was, I think, a mistake on my part.

Q: We have been faulted here or there, a long history of Foreign Service reporting and all, and one of the ones that must have been prevalent when you were in Kabul was what had happened in Iran about our embassy being told don't report anything bad about the shah. But was that a lesson that you think it permeated it or was it still-?



MCWILLIAMS: No, I don't think so. And when we talk about it later, my experience in Islamabad pretty much confirmed to me that there are embassies, there are missions that will hold back on what they perceive to be the bad news, negative news. They'll try to shape it. I mean, it's one level of mistake to shape information so that the press doesn't learn something that you don't want them to learn. But when you're also keeping that information from policymakers within the administration by simply not reporting or reporting it erroneously, as happened subsequently to this in my career, then I think clearly a Foreign Service officer is not doing his or her job.

Q: Well now were you getting Washington types coming in and were you able to brief them?

MCWILLIAMS: No. We had, in my two years there we had one CODEL and the visits by senior officials were very rare because of course this was not a mission that represented itself to the country, well, represented itself to the government only insofar as we had contact with the foreign ministry so you're not going to bring in senior people to meet with Kabul officials. You just didn't do that. So my boss, for example, Chargé Elam, frequently was going out to either Islamabad or to Washington, I'd say every month or two, in order to brief personally and to inform officials in person what was going on, which by the way gave me lots of time as acting chargé, which I didn't mind. But that was the way it worked essentially, very little incoming traffic which also for a Foreign Service officer is welcome because you don't have to deal with visitors so much.

Q: Well did you find, was there maybe a growing sense of elation or at least subdued elation about the Stinger thing and all? I mean, Americans love gimmicks and you know, there's always a gimmick that's going to win a war and all of a sudden we seem to have had a gimmick.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. A silver bullet. Yes, I think there was a sense of this is really changing things. But to go a little bit beyond your question I think what we failed to do in Washington at the policy level was to fully calculate the implications of this. That is to say this was no longer an effort simply to bleed the Soviets but the Soviets might indeed be pushed out of Afghanistan and what was our policy, our planning for that eventuality? And I think there wasn't much done and I think that basically was a fundamental problem that approached us later on. Rather I think we allowed the Pakistanis and particularly the ISI, this is the intelligence agency in Pakistan, military intelligence, to essentially chart that course, the post-Soviet withdrawal period and that was a tragic mistake.

Q: Yes, because it led to the rise of fundamentalism and we're still living with that today.



MCWILLIAMS: And chaos in Afghanistan. Just a very bad policy choice. Well that didn't become clear until '89, '90.

Q: What about the other embassies? Let's take say, the Chinese. China, I mean, I keep looking at that long appendices or whatever it is. I mean, does that mean anything for the Chinese? I mean, what were the Chinese doing there?

MCWILLIAMS: The Chinese I think were there for strategic reasons. The notion that they were an Asian power, that they had to monitor developments there. I think they were also, much as we were, very anxious to observe what the Soviets were doing, their failures, their successes. It was a very large embassy and they had a number of good Dari, Pashtun speakers on their staff which amazed me. But I think it was essentially a monitoring mission that did not attempt to influence the conflict very much. It was a large and relatively effective embassy.

Q: Did you get any indication- one, did you have contact, much contact with them and were they saying hey, keep those missiles coming in or something like that?

MCWILLIAMS: No, it wouldn't go quite that far. But I'll tell you we used to have two weekly meetings, that is, we in the Western embassies. One of them was quite restrictive, essentially just the senior NATO (North American Treaty Alliance) missions where we'd trade intelligence but then there was a larger meeting in which the Chinese participated and they would come in and share intelligence, often really weak stuff although I think it was our impression that they were simply not sharing very much, they had a lot more. But they were participants in this allied anti-Soviet posture weekly meeting session whereby we'd trade intelligence.

Q: How about the Brits? I mean, invaded Afghanistan three times. Have you read the Flashman books?

MCWILLIAMS: Of course, yes.

Q: By, was it George McDonald Fraser?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

Q: A wonderful novel. Sitting there in that bowl and letting all things, hell break loose. I would think-



MCWILLIAMS: Very good history actually.

Q: It's very good history. But anyway, did the Brits feel any particular for watching this because of their experiences?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. It was a good embassy. They had very good people, small embassy but very effective. And they did bring to Afghanistan that perspective which they would use occasionally in analysis. But on the other hand, of course, Afghans being Afghans knowing their history, there was a little bit of resentment among Afghans towards the Brits that we didn't feel simply because of the history.

Q: Were the French playing any role in this at all?

MCWILLIAMS: French had a large embassy there. Quite good in terms of their analysis and intelligence collection and I must say towards the end of my term there, and this was when the Soviets clearly were in trouble, the chargé d'affaires who actually had been the number two at the embassy in Vientiane when I first started out in 1976. I remember having long person-to-person discussions with him because we were good friends and his analysis of the survivability of the Najibullah regime post-Soviet withdrawal was bang on and I, believing my own propaganda tended to think of Najibullah as being short-term once the Soviets pulled out. I was wrong and he was right and I must say in that context I think the French had a very good understanding of what was going on.

Q: Did Iran play any role while you were there?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. We of course had no contact with the Iranians but the Iranians had a large embassy, they were quite active, and we were always somewhat suspicious that they had contacts with the Soviets. Iran's interests, of course, in Afghanistan were particular to Iran. That is, they were very worried about a Western presence, they were very worried about a Russian presence. They have a long exposed border with Afghanistan and on the Iran side that border is populated with peoples who are basically ethnic kin to those on the Afghan side.

Q: I've talked to Mike Metrisko-

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes.



Q: -and Mike was saying when he was there, I mean, everybody went over to Iran to, you know, to get your eyeglasses or what have you.

MCWILLIAMS: Sure, sure.

Q: I mean, this is-

MCWILLIAMS: Well, you had, of course you had a very large refugee population in Iran at that time as well from Afghanistan but I think the Iranians had a very real concern about what was going on in Afghanistan and I think that they certainly weren't playing the Western game but neither were they playing the Russian game. They had their own interests and I think a very sophisticated understanding of their own interests vis-à-vis<sup>1/2</sup>-vis what was happening in Afghanistan.

Q: Well did you find- how would you deal with it- you mentioned rug merchants, sort of the bazarees, they're a breed unto themselves throughout that whole area. Were they, was that probably the best place, most approachable group?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, very approachable because I mean just the way you buy a rug. You perhaps know from that area you go in and you sip tea and you bargain over the rug price. But of course the bargaining entails, you know, talking about the family and so on and so on and talking about all sorts of things but the price of the rug. But I must say I wound up with an awful lot of rugs, which I really don't need. But I mean, it was- and you got to know certain individuals and they knew what you were after. And I can remember on a number of occasions walking down one of the rug merchant streets and being hailed by one of the merchants who'd say you know, I've really got a really nice rug you need to see. And of course as you go into the shop it's not the rug he wants to sell you, it's some information he's picked up. So I mean, we had a nice relationship with some of those people.

Q: Did the killing of Spike Dubs, our ambassador there, this was back in what?

MCWILLIAMS: '79.

Q: '79. But did that still rankle or?



MCWILLIAMS: No, not really, not really. I'm not sure why it didn't but of course we'd gone through several generations at the embassy but we did have a stone out in the yard of the embassy and we had annual commemorations and that stone was taken care of. And of course there was always the suspicion that somehow maybe the Soviets were involved in the killing of Spike Dubs.

Q: I talked to someone, whose name I forget, who felt that the Soviets were there. Bruce, it will come to me.

MCWILLIAMS: I'm afraid I probably know the name you're searching for but I don't know it either. Well, I mean, the question seems to me and I've not studied this deeply but it's either a badly botched Soviet rescue effort or a Soviet effort that entailed a quiet plan to rid themselves of Spike Dubs. So in a sense it worked because I think their determination was at that critical stage of the revolution to get rid of the very significant American presence there and that's what happened. The Americans scaled back dramatically at that stage.

Q: Did you get any feel for what was happening inside the equivalent to the Kabul Kremlin?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I mean, that was one of the things, of course, that we were most focused on, the politics of the regime itself. And it was interesting because when I arrived Babrak Karmal was the head of the government and he was replaced within a few months by Najibullah, who was thought to have been the KGB man whereas Babrak Karmal was more the man of the Moscow politicians and to some extent the party, the communist party of the Soviet Union. So there was a division not only within the regime but also within the Soviet communist structure because in our estimation the army and the party and the KGB all had, to some extent, separate interests and separate candidates within the Najibullah- within the Kabul regime.

Q: It's tricky ground but how did you find you worked with our station there, the CIA people?



MCWILLIAMS: There was a bad situation there. Because of the nature of our relationship with that regime we were prevented from having contact with anyone in the government except the foreign ministry and the chief, station chief, who was a very quiet and secretive person even among us apparently at one point began developing relationships outside the foreign ministry. Now, this could have been an attempt to recruit which would be defensible but it became clear to me, based on what he told me directly that what he was simply doing was picking up intelligence to report, which was what we all were doing of course. And this was a cardinal breach in the understanding not only that we had vis-à-vis the government but also a breach in the ranks of the NATO embassies which were very, very careful not to develop these external contacts, that is contacts outside the foreign ministry. Anyway, I brought this to the attention of the chargé and he understood the implications of this, that this was a mistake that would basically break ranks with the other NATO embassies and someone had to stop and he had a confrontation with the chief of station and as it turned out it was on one of his fairly frequent trips back to Washington to brief and back in Washington said I want this man out. And it caused quite a problem between the Agency and State but the chargé won and he was removed. A very acid scene I can recall to this day wherein the farewell, which included all of our local nationals, he came over and shook his finger in my face as the man who was prompting his removal. But after his departure he was not replaced and his deputy basically became a one man operation and he was the man who I mentioned earlier that I shared duties with, basically I picked up monitoring of Soviet ground movements and so on. And we had a very good relationship, he was a real professional, young fellow but just damned good at what he did. So that worked well although I think that that problem perhaps influenced my subsequent problems in Islamabad.

Q: Well you know, looking at it as an outsider to the thing, I would think that one gets awfully precious if you say well we're not going to have secretive contacts with inside a government. Well that's what you're supposed to be doing, you know. I mean-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes but it was sort of an understanding because frankly there were a number of embassies, notably the German embassy I recall and the Austrian embassy which actually was quite active for other reasons I'll explain later, but they were constantly trying to broaden their network to begin to have relations with other offices within the government particularly on trade issues and so on. And it was left to the Americans to sort of pound the table and say you must not go beyond what we have here. And in that sense what our colleague was doing basically would have ruptured, we felt, the line that we had insisted upon with the other embassies, that they not have broader relations outside of just relationship with the foreign ministry.



Q: I've often wondered at diplomatic practice where, you know, in time of crises we'll withdraw our ambassador. In other words, put the second person in which strikes me you'd want the first person in. If you've really got a problem, I mean, it's almost counterintuitive to diminish your contacts at a time of trouble. Was this ever considered?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I mean, we never, oh, I see what you're saying. In other words, why didn't we have a full-fledged ambassador there?

Q: Yes or working. I mean, here they are and we've got to deal with them and let's get in there and-

MCWILLIAMS: So long as you have, you know, a first rank professional, whether you give him title of ambassador or DCM or charg ½ d'affaires, theoretically you're going to accomplish the same purpose. But I think at a political level is another response to that and that is Congress, which was very pro-mujahideen, very anti-Soviet occupation force, simply would not have countenanced the naming of an ambassador to Afghanistan. I mean, the fact that we had an embassy there at all met with a lot of criticism in Congress. So at least in this instance, I recognize your broader point, but in this instance there was simply no way that we would have ever had an ambassador in that post.

Q: What were the Austrians up to?

MCWILLIAMS: Well the Austrians, it's interesting, you don't think of them in Afghanistan but they had a very extensive trading relationship throughout much of the 20th century, trucking and so on, through Iran and so on, firms that had decades and decades of experience in Afghanistan and as a consequence they were interested in the place and they also had a network of contacts, old business contacts in Afghanistan that were quite useful. So they had a very tiny embassy but a very well led embassy, well staffed embassy and they became very good friends of the American embassy.

Q: I mean, were they, did you find that a good source of information?

MCWILLIAMS: Sure, sure. This is again, the diplomatic network and you know, you think of these cocktail parties and good lord, we had enough cocktail parties. But these were actually useful because certainly the British had interesting contacts, as I say, the Austrians had interesting contacts, the Germans had maintained some of their social organizations in the past and therefore had good contacts. So there was through the entire NATO structure pretty good contacts into the society which we were able to draw upon for I think reasonably good intelligence.



Q: Oh, just, I want to put in here the name of the person who was outside the room where Ambassador Dubs was killed was Bruce Flatin, F-L-A-T-I-N. And if somebody wants an account of one person's impression of what happened we have his oral history.

What about, you know, when in later times hears about the lion of the north, Masood. How was he viewed at the time? I mean, do we get any feel about the differences and the approaches to these different people?

MCWILLIAMS: I should say first of all that the American perspective on Masood was complex because so much of our assessment of what was going on in Afghanistan was influenced by ISI in Pakistan, the military, which had a pretty bad relationship with Masood for most of the time.

Q: And also we're talking about North-South too, aren't we?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I mean, there was a connection problem just in terms of communication difficulty. But we were influenced I think to a heavy extent by the ISI perspective which was not positive about Masood. And within Masood's own history with the Soviets he had at various points declared regional truces where he would pull back in his offensive against the Soviets only to reemerge some months later and to attack them. But because of his periodic deals with the Soviets the propaganda line against by his opponents was that he was a deal maker with the Soviets. In point of fact I think he was probably I think almost certainly the most effective anti-Soviet mujahideen leader of the war. But he did have to explain himself in terms of why periodically he would make these deals.

Q: Did we see, thinking about the North, you know, was it apparent that the Soviets were having trouble with communications, land communications and all or not at that time?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, with the introductions of the Stinger, yes. I mean, they certainly had problems communicating with remote valleys and so on. Actually there were some other new weapons systems introduced to the mujahideen which were more effective vis-à-vis the Soviet convoys but I think the Soviets for the most part maintained their capacity to maneuver in the country almost right up to the end. I'm leaping ahead a little bit but after they had declared their intention to leave, at one point this would have been in probably early '89, just at the turn of the year, probably '89, they were determined to make one last convoy down to Kandahar, basically a re-supply movement that was intended to beef up the Najibullah forces in Kandahar, and they were able to do it notwithstanding the fact that the CIA in Islamabad reported that they had failed, in fact they made it. It was a point of confrontation we had I'll describe later.



Q: That was, you moved to Islamabad.

MCWILLIAMS: After I'd gotten to Islamabad.

Q: And up there. While you were up to- you left when, the summer of '88?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I left I think July of '88 and then picked up my new assignment in very early September of '88 in Islamabad.

Q: Okay. Up to by the time you left were we thinking in a way the unthinkable, that the Soviets were losing?

MCWILLIAMS: Well it was clear. I mean, the Soviets had agreed at this point to a negotiated withdrawal of their troops and what became the critical issue was what to be left in their wake. Obviously it was their intention to leave Najibullah, the puppet regime, in power and it was our intention to see that that didn't happen. But that became a very complex game because you can't replace somebody with nobody and effectively we had nobody.

Q: What about, were we checking, you know, usual things when you have these wars of this nature the atrocity stories abound. Sometimes they're justified, sometimes not, you know, the idea of sprinkling the country with plastic toys that would blow up in the hands of kids and that sort of thing or going out and massacring whole villages. What were you getting from both sides from your perspective?



MCWILLIAMS: Well we had, obviously that would have been something very useful for us, an atrocity story would have been very useful for us, in the context of our propaganda work so that we certainly did report Soviet operations which entailed very significant casualties among the local population. We certainly did report, I think accurately, tales of Najibullah's secret police's torturing of prisoners and so on. So that was something that we focused on very heavily. I'm not sure we got it right all the time. I think we did a reasonably good job. I recall at one point the International Committee to the Red Cross, a great institution, was in negotiation with the regime to come in and to begin to monitor prison conditions. And I remember personally sort of launching a crusade that they not be allowed in because in my estimation they could not, they would not be able to work on terms that would really produce reliable reporting. Moreover, as you may know, the ICRC does not report publicly; they essentially make their assessments to the government and make recommendations on the basis of what they've seen. And I remember resisting that strongly and I think in retrospect that was a mistake. I think since then came to really have a lot of regard and respect for the ICRC and I think it was appropriate that they did in fact did move in. Although we, I think to some extent partly because of my involvement, we stalled their arrival a bit and I regret that, I think that was a mistake on my part.

Q: Well you know, in a way, these so-called secret reports always leak too, don't they, or not?

MCWILLIAMS: I think that the ICRC plays it very wisely. The reports that they want to see leaked do get leaked and usually without the finger pointing at them. I think of Guantanamo. But I think it's a very good institution. I watched them work in Tajikistan and the civil war subsequently and was very impressed with the bravery of their staff as individuals but also their very sophisticated approach to very complex situations.

Q: Well then, oh, with Najibullah, did you have any, what was your impression of him and his coterie?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, his reputation as he came in was as, they used to call him The Bull because he's a very heavysset man although subsequently he was called The Cow, this is all in Dari, which was actually an unmanly thing to do but in any event. And he certainly had a very brutal reputation and his secret police certainly did do some terrible things. But he was also very astute, he played his tribal connection in Paktia very well, pulling some Pashtuns to his side. The man he replaced, Babrak Karmal, was a more charismatic figure; he was a lush, he was also a drunk. But it was a very strange situation. When he was replaced, this is Babrak Karmal's replacement, I remember he was essentially, it was seen that he had simply bucked the Soviets too many times on too many little things, that they were irritated with him and they wanted him out. And whether or not this was true, and I think it was partially true, this rumor spread through Kabul, that the Soviets were pushing Babrak Karmal, their man, out. And I remember the day he was being driven to the airport word got around when he'd be leaving the palace and headed for the airport so we went out to see this and so did much of Kabul. And to our amazement, standing in fairly full streets watching this man go out, he was cheered as he left. And I remember that causing a real problem for our reporting because in some ways it was good because it suggested that the people saw him as to some extent an anti-Soviet figure but nonetheless you've been demeaning this man for a number of years and now you have to report his triumphal departure.

But in terms of Najibullah, I think the real assessment of his intelligence as a politician would have to come at the end of his regime. He played the situation after the Soviet withdrawal brilliantly. And I might say we played it incredibly badly. But he proved to be not only a fairly brutal but a pretty smart leader.

Q: Okay. When you left in the summer of '88, from your perspective whither Afghanistan? How did you see it?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I mentioned earlier this conversation I had had with the French chargé d'affaires and we'd bet, as I recall, a case of champagne on this and that would be the fall of Kandahar and I put a date on it, very foolishly, lost that bet. I think I left convinced that Najibullah's days were numbered and that we were on the verge of a very significant victory. It was only when I got to Islamabad and fairly early on began to have contact with Afghans who saw things, I think, a lot more, in a lot more sophisticated way that I began to, myself, appreciate the complexity of this conflict.

Q: Okay you got, what was your job, when did you go to Islamabad?



MCWILLIAMS: There had been growing concern in Congress that things were going awry in Afghanistan. There were a number of problems, particularly among conservatives in Congress, that they saw that, they felt that the United States was giving far too much assistance to the most fundamentalist elements of the mujahideen alliance, a concern that reporting was not as consistent or solid as it should be. And in order to respond to that growing concern the administration, remembering this is a Republican administration, of course, decided to acquiesce to their insistence that a special envoy be created, a position be created that would have opportunity to report from Afghanistan/Pakistan directly without any kind of interference from the embassy or the CIA or even, well to the State Department but the State Department would not control that reporting either, with the implicit understanding that much of this reporting would be shared with Congress as well. And the administration agreed to that and initially they had wanted this to be an ambassadorial level position but the State Department, perhaps anticipating, well, recalling that I had been doing a lot of reporting that they liked, basically the themes they liked, I think the feeling was, well we can trust McWilliams to do what he's been doing, basically to be a propagandist for the war effort. So I was selected, there was initial...

Q: The person who had you selected was?

MCWILLIAMS: I think Ambassador Raphel had a great deal to do with my selection because he liked my reporting. And he had a very good name on the Hill and certainly in the State Department. He was a great man.

Q: I wonder if you could go back because you know, we're really talking about a very peculiar situation where you have Congress saying we don't trust the embassy, the embassies really, the two embassies of what's, well, I mean-

MCWILLIAMS: No, I think Congress's concern very frankly was not, certainly not with the embassy in Kabul which was reporting what they wanted to hear pretty much. And I don't think in a real sense it was a problem with the embassy in Islamabad, more it was a problem with the CIA.

Q: Did you get any feel back there, I mean obviously somebody inside the system is talking to people in Congress about this and did you get any feel any of the players or who was behind this? Because usually somebody in there-



MCWILLIAMS: Well I tell you, I think to some extent some of the mujahideen parties, particularly the royalists and the more sophisticated democratic elements from the mujahideen, would travel to Washington and would meet with congressmen and their perpetual complaint was you people are giving far too much to the fundamentalists, Gobadeen, Sayyaf, and basically you're going to lose this because you're going to get people who are really very anti-American in power out there. And I think that over time this consistent message was believed and accepted by a number of people in Congress because the CIA, working with ISI and the Saudis, were really very much pro-fundamentalists. And I think this was the principle concern in Congress.

Q: Okay. Well then, let's talk about your impressions, your briefing before you went out there or was there much of one?

MCWILLIAMS: No, there wasn't much of a briefing before I went out. It was all done very, very quickly. I was given like a week or ten days between assignments and just basically raced right out there. I don't even recall that many sessions on the Hill. I think I met with staffers, I might have met with Senator Humphrey, I don't recall exactly but it was very, very brief. I was out there before I really had a chance to breathe. But I had a very warm reception. As I say, of course Ambassador Arnie Raphel had just been killed so that the embassy was in mourning in a very real sense and Ambassador Oakley, who had replaced him had only been on the ground a week ahead of me, I think, he and I had known each other from the old days, the Vietnam days, he was the deputy assistant secretary when I was in the EAP bureau and we knew each other and I think had a reasonably good relationship. And he seemed to be in his own way extremely, effusively warm and congratulatory about my assignment and how things were going to work fine and notwithstanding the fact that I was going to have this free, this right to report, he knew we could work this out, arm around the shoulder sort of thing, intimidatingly friendly if you know Ambassador Oakley. And I was in my own way a little slow to, I recall, meet with the CIA people. I knew some of the people there and some of the lead CIA staff and I was friendly with them but I didn't, apparently as it turned out, call on the CIA chief early enough and that was a problem I recall, initially, I waited three or four days before I actually called on him and that was taken as a mistake, I recall that quite vividly.



But anyway, I wanted very much to travel. One of the problems that I thought I understood with the embassy was that it didn't get out very much. It was either reporting from Islamabad or reporting from Peshawar. And I said look, we have a major mujaheddin presence down in Quetta, various places along the border. We have mujaheddin, I'm going to get out there and visit these places, use my Dari, which is not too bad and get to know these people, get to know what their thinking is and so on. And so very early on I began traveling and this is what I think helped me a great deal because I began to get a perspective that was not current in the embassy. That is to say, genuine concerns and complaints among commanders because quite often the commanders would of course come back across the border and you get sort of firsthand what the situation was like inside. And the consistent theme I got was the notion that the ISI was penalizing the democrats and the royalists and favoring the fundamentalists, particularly Gulbaddin.

Q: What was the reading, I mean, you obviously picked up some stuff when you were in Kabul but you're now in Islamabad, about the ISI, which stands for what?

MCWILLIAMS: The Inter-Service Strategic Intelligence.

Q: Well, I mean, it's basically the military's intelligence out there, which was a power unto itself.

MCWILLIAMS: Even within the military, yes.

Q: What were you getting, where were they coming from and their relationship to the government of Pakistan?

MCWILLIAMS: This was of course during the period of Benazir Bhutto and the sense was that the military and particularly the ISI operated almost independently of the \_\_\_\_\_ politicians. And certainly vis-à-vis Afghan policy it was not clear that they answered to anyone, that they essentially ran the show and reported as they saw necessary to civilian officials. It was an ISI-directed war and-

Q: Where did they come out sort of politically or religiously?



MCWILLIAMS: I think ISI was significantly influenced by the man who'd been their greatest backer, this was General Zia, who himself was quite a fundamentalist but had this vision of strategic depth whereby Pakistan could only be defended effectively if it essentially controlled Afghanistan and thereby had connections to Central Asia and to Iran vis-à-vis<sup>1/2</sup> their perennial adversary India, only to somewhat a lesser extent a concern about the Soviet threat to Pakistan. So I think ISI took a lot of its green, that is to say fundamentalist Islamic coloration from Zia's patronage of that institution. He saw to it that the people in ISI were, to a very significant extent, fundamentalist as he was.

Q: Did you have any contact with the ISI?

MCWILLIAMS: Very, very little.

Q: I mean, did they avoid you in the field and all?

MCWILLIAMS: Certainly as it became clear that I was a critic I had little or not contact. I think the CIA working in partnership with the ISI essentially alerted them this was not someone that they wanted to get too close to.

Q: Well, I mean, did you I won't say conversion but on the way to Damascus but did you have an epiphany as you started getting out there?

MCWILLIAMS: I had a series of them. And as I say it came in contact with Afghans, often very well educated Afghans, for example in Peshawar there were NGO Afghans who understood the problems of the society and were deeply involved. Also some of the mujaheddin, for example, one of my, perhaps my best friend was Hamid Karzai who at that time was a deputy to Mujadidi.

Q: Now the president of Afghanistan.

MCWILLIAMS: Now the president. And very wise and very, I think perceptive about the problems posed by our support for, through the ISI, Gulbaddin in particular. And of course there was the Saudi dimension which I didn't focus on perhaps sufficiently but it was clear that the Saudis, working through Sayyaf also represented a very fundamentalist influence in the mujaheddin struggle.

Q: Did Osama bin Laden cross your sights?



MCWILLIAMS: No, no. Never did. He was there at the same time, obviously, although I subsequently had a wonderful conversation with a German journalist who recalled meeting with Gulbaddin and sitting next to him was a very tall Arab fellow whom he subsequently understood was in fact Osama bin Laden who was introduced to him by Gulbuddin simply as the man who handles my finances, which I thought was interesting. But no, I'm not aware that I ever met- The American contact with the Saudis was very limited because they were thought to be pretty radical.

Q: Well what were you picking up then? I mean, what, sort of what happened to you and how did you play this?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, what I had learned in the first month or so, maybe almost two months, I had written, I wrote a report in October which was very devastating to my relationship with Oakley and the CIA. What I was picking up essentially was that not only was there favoritism to Gulbuddin and Sayyaf, mostly Gulbuddin because the Saudis were supporting Sayyaf, but there was penalties inflicted upon other mujaheddin groups who didn't defer to Gulbuddin, who didn't work with him. Also it was clear that there was misreporting coming out of Afghanistan through the CIA and their contacts about victories which were magnified for Gulbuddin and diminished for others. There was a failed attempt to rally the forces to Gulbuddin in Kandahar region which was a disaster because the local Afghans turned against Gulbuddin. I reported in a dissent message, well it wasn't a dissent message formally, it was just simply very, very different from what the CIA and the embassy was reporting in October, saying that I felt things were going very, very badly, that Afghans perceived a victory by a Gulbuddin-led alliance as being a very negative prospect for Afghanistan. I was also contending that we should not equate Pakistan's best interests with necessarily Afghanistan's best interests, we should not subordinate Afghanistan's interests to Pakistan's interests, which was the governing philosophy in Islamabad. So these things were not well accepted by the embassy or by the CIA but did, I think, touch some already, I think in Washington there's already a sense that this was the case and I think they needed someone to articulate it. Because subsequently I heard from friends in the department, actually even some people in the CIA, that they had been waiting for this line of analysis, that they had been hoping for something like this, that they were getting some of the same thing through contacts with other mujaheddin parties and so on. And this was very difficult.

I recall one incident that was sort of typical for me. One of the parties had come to me with evidence including videotape of an attempt by Gulbuddin to sell Stingers to Iran and they even had, basically this one party had intercepted the convoy going to Iran and filmed the attack on it and actually brought back parts with serial numbers of the Stingers which they gave me as evidence of what Gulbuddin was capable of. And I presented this information in a package to the charg<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> at the time, Oakley was out of country and Beth Jones was the DCM and she was-



Q: Who was the charge½?

MCWILLIAMS: Beth Jones.

Q: Beth Jones, yes.

MCWILLIAMS: And I presented all of this to her, videotaped parts with serial numbers and the entire story and she thanked me for it. And some months, I guess maybe a month later, it was still in '88, I recall working on a weekend and needing some paper so I went into her secretary's office to get some paper and opened a cupboard and there sat the whole package of information, the Stinger parts and so on. It never left her office. And it just underscored to me that this was an embassy that wasn't telling Washington all it knew.

Q: Did you find, you know, so often in an embassy and you go back to Vietnam or Greece or anything else where at the top you have the ambassador, DCM and maybe the consular sort of presuming a certain line, you know, let's live with this government, let's not upset things. And then you get your junior officers who tend to get out in the field more and tend to be more radical, I mean this is a normal age difference and all, saying hey wait a minute, this isn't the way it is and all. Did you sense that at our embassy?

MCWILLIAMS: No, there was very little room for that. This was an embassy with very little dissent. And I found that I, particularly on those officers who had some responsibility for Afghanistan, there was, I got some help. This included some consular officials out there who assisted me in making contacts, providing me with information, insisting that their names not be associated with the pass of information or something. But it was, I think, a staff which was to some extent intimidated.

Q: Well, did you find yourself, I mean, I think of this bureaucratically and it sounds, you're the son of a bitch from out of town coming in to look at things and report independently and you know, in any type of operation this person is not looked upon kindly.

MCWILLIAMS: Sure.

Q: Did you find yourself beginning to get frozen out of things and all that?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes. I mean, that came a little bit later into the spring of '89 but I was not being invited into meetings. With congressional delegations coming in I was not part of the briefing team although that became rather difficult because a number of teams coming in, I recall one in particular, insisted on meeting with me, and in the ambassador's home I met with them and as he proceeded to brief them in his way I briefed differently. And I can recall being told two or three times by a very angry ambassador shut up Ed, shut up Ed. This is in front of the team. The CODEL was obviously aghast at this and met with me subsequently. But yes, what the- the strategy was to get me out of there, to basically Ed was having problems mentally or something. I recall that there was an attempt when I went home for a week-and-a-half at Christmas, I'd just lost my mother so I wanted to get home for the rest of the family, there was an attempt to keep me there. That didn't work. And then in the spring there was an investigation launched that was intended to basically strip me of my security clearance. The first allegation was that I was leaking the identify of CIA officials at the embassy and that led nowhere because I was not. Then there was- the investigation continued to role with a new allegation that I was an alcoholic. And then when that failed there was an allegation that I was homosexual. And that continued. And this investigation transpired without my knowledge except that the person charged with running it through State was a friend of mine in the embassy structure out there and he kept me informed as to where the investigation was going. But that failed. But there was an attempt not only to get me out of there but to strip me of my security clearance which would have ended my career.

Q: Well I would think that you would be in a certain position of power because you were put in there to be the son of a bitch from out of town and that there would be- you would have a rabbi in Congress or somebody.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think essentially I did and that's why they went to this extent to sort of strip me of my security clearance. When I was home at Christmas, '88-'89, '88 that would have been, I actually met with the assistant secretary, Murphy at that point, and-

Q: Ted Murphy, yes.

MCWILLIAMS: And sat down with him in a very brief meeting and said here's what I think is happening and I think you ought to know this. And this was before the investigations and the personal pressure had begun but I remember him saying well, we think you're doing a hell of a job, just keep doing what you're doing. And I walked out of there thinking well, okay. So I went back somewhat recharged but as I say after that Christmas break and going into '89 things became very difficult.



One of the key things that developed, as the Soviets had pulled out, there was a plan, essentially an ISI/Oakley plan, to attack Jalalabad. We had formed a government among the Tanzeens, among the mujaheddin parties, this is the Afghan interim government. I should say a very staged affair that basically ISI and the Saudis and we arranged and ran, a very transparent, false effort on our part. But nonetheless a government was set up and the feeling was that we needed to get a position in Afghanistan for that government to sit. And Jalalabad near the Pakistani border was seen as the perfect place to go.

So a plan developed in January-February to attack Jalalabad and seize it and with that perhaps force the collapse of the Najibullah regime. The commanders whom I was friendly with, particularly in the Peshawar area, Admiral Haq among them, were aghast. They said this will take six to eight months to plan. You've got to get the tribal chiefs in the area tied in. You've got to decide who's going to attack where. We've got to get these troops trained for- and we're used to mujaheddin attacks, we're not used to conventional warfare which this would have entailed. We need heavy artillery, we need air support. You know, we need weapons we don't even know how to operate. So I had an extensive, I remember one, over one weekend meeting with Abdul Haq and the commanders that he brought to me saying we can't do this, this isn't going to work. And I came back with that and reported. I remember Abdul Haq saying at one point, again reflecting the resentment, deep resentment of mujaheddin about the ISI, his line was how is it that we Afghans who never lost a war must take advice from the Pakistanis who never won one? And I put that into the cable, I recall, and that really got the embassy angry because they were very pro-Pakistani and they hated Abdul Haq.

But anyway, I reported this, that this is not going to work and tragically in fact it didn't. It was a terrible disaster. Lots of blood lost on the side of the mujaheddin. What had happened was pretty much what was anticipated, the various mujaheddin parties couldn't coordinate, couldn't cooperate. For example, as you probably know there's a long road from Kabul to Jalalabad that was supposed to be cut so that they couldn't resupply and one unit was going to maintain the cut there, they wouldn't let them get across. Well they pulled off before the other team was ready to come in so there's a surge of supplies that got through. Basically there was no defense against air so that our mujaheddin friends were being blown out of the flatlands around Jalalabad as they tried to attack the airport. And towards the end what they were doing was sucking up young people from the refugee communities who had no training at all, just throwing them in as cannon fire; tremendous bloodshed. And at one point one of them wore, fundamentalist commanders captured some of the Najibullah troops and slaughtered them and the point was taken by the Najibullah side you better damned well defend your position and don't even think about surrender because you're going to be killed if you surrender. And that got back to Kabul and essentially it steeled the resolve of the defenders, we've got to defend here. And it went on for a month and a half or so and eventually petered out and he succeeded in defending Jalalabad. And that gave new courage to his forces all over the country and frankly, Afghans being Afghans, they saw this defeat of mujaheddin as very significant and they began discussions with Najibullah and it gave him several years' lease on life.



Q: Well there's nothing worse in the Foreign Service than to predict something that turns out to be correct when the rest of the people come. I mean, what happened to you?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, by that point I was pretty much frozen out. We had these terrible situations where I'd write my report and while they couldn't change the report the ambassador would add on a comment or the DCM or the station would add on a comment essentially rebutting what I'd said up above. But I learned the trick of basically catching this cable just before it went out and I'd add my own rebuttal to their rebuttal. So it was, apparently I've been told subsequently that these cables were great reading in the State Department because they could see the debate, you know, on paper and it was just very interesting.

Q: Well knowing Washington, did this get into Congress-

MCWILLIAMS: Sure.

Q: -and did this get to be a matter of press and that sort of thing?

MCWILLIAMS: No. It never got into the press until the very end. I got to say that, and perhaps this is a lack of professionalism on my part, but just as I had sort of been a briefer for the press when I was in Kabul, talking about the terrible Soviet occupation, I certainly was in touch with journalists in Pakistan. And I was certainly prepared to share things that I thought was important. And this would be only information that I was gathering, I certainly wouldn't reporting anything that CIA had or the embassy had, but it became very clear that there was a new perspective out there on what was going on and as a consequence I had a lot of contact with journalists. So this is also basically bleeding into the press.

Q: Well how did you find this reputation went with the Afghan military leaders there in the camps and also with the Pakistanis? Did you find reflections against you?

MCWILLIAMS: I had very little contact with Pakistanis as I said earlier because I think it was clear the CIA didn't want me talking to them because I would theoretically find things out from them that they wouldn't want used. I think among Afghans it was appreciated that I was essentially accepting their perspective that Gobadeen was getting too much assistance, that he was getting away with things that, you know, he shouldn't have been getting away with in terms of attacking other mujaheddin units, which he did.



Q: Well you know, you're talking about this package showing Gobadeen was involved in, I mean, the missiles, the Stinger missiles were a very sensitive subject because we were extremely concerned that these might show up in the United States or something or somebody else-

MCWILLIAMS: Well and the notion that these, this particular batch was being smuggled to Iran for a price.

Q: Yes. I would think that- were you able one, to get the information out? I mean, I would think that it would be part of your mandate to, okay, you don't have the package but say I have a package and send it by your own channel.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, to the extent that I'd already surrendered everything I had including the videotapes and the parts to the DCM, they're in her possession at that point, I think by the time I realized that that had not been forwarded it was just one of a series of things that convinced me that, you know, I was not in a working relationship with that embassy and it became clear that they wanted me to leave and the way they did that essentially was to convince Congress and Washington that now it was time to get a senior, a more senior official into that position. And I argued strongly that I should remain for awhile as that person's deputy to get him introduced to the same people, frankly, that I had come to know. But what they did actually was to send a message back saying that I had requested a termination of the assignment which in fact was not true. I've never seen that degree of dishonesty before in my career or since. And as a consequence I was terminated, brought back to Washington and there was no job for me at all.

Q: Well I mean, okay you have an embassy. And you know, embassies get reputations for clientitis and of course I think our embassies in Pakistan and India have had this sometimes relatively benign relationship but usually it's been each embassy has adopted the position of the country in which they are. So, I mean, this is nothing new even though it's a different enemy or a different thing.

MCWILLIAMS: It's nothing new and I've certainly encountered it.

Q: But when you got back to Washington was, why weren't you greeted, I won't say as a hero but as an effective officer and let's do something?



MCWILLIAMS: Well there was one thing that was done. They did an end of assignment OER for me from the embassy which was devastating but in an unusual, I've never had it before, the bureau wrote their own OER which was very flattering so you had that in the record. It was a sort of two-perspective thing. It was unusual also the week I returned a reporter, Steve Coll from The Washington Post did a, basically an expose on what had happened to me and he called me the night before it's publication and I had not talked to him before, to check some facts, I said I can't deal with this, this is not something I want to be a part of. But it was printed the next day and oddly enough it appeared when I was interviewing for my next job, that very morning, and I went through the interview, dreading, hoping the fellow hadn't seen the article and there's no reference to it but the interview went very well but at the end he said oh, that was quite an article on you this morning in The Post. And I sort of sheepishly said yes. But in any event he, I got the job so this was to be as the number two in our embassy in Nicaragua.

Q: You were given hot spots to go to, I guess.

MCWILLIAMS: Well that one was particularly interesting but, I can get into that later, I wanted to mention though for this that there's a book called Ghost Wars by Steve Coll who actually wrote this article also which is a very good book on the whole Afghanistan period and gives in pretty good detail what was going on in '88-'89 including a great deal more.

Q: What did, how did he find out what was happening to you? I mean, did you find yourself the subject of, I won't say gossip but of conversations in the corridors of State?

MCWILLIAMS: Sure, sure. I mean, the embassy, the entire embassy knew what was going on and it was a consequence. The relatively inbred community out there, both on the diplomatic side and certainly the press corps were aware that things were amiss at the embassy. Actually I think the principle source for Coll's article in The Washington Post was an embassy staffer, whose name I'm not even going to use, whom I didn't think was a particularly good friend of mine but nonetheless she knew the story and I believe she conveyed much of it to him.

Q: What happened sort of, just to give a feel for the bureaucracy, promotion-wise? Did this work for you, against you or what happened?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, it should have pretty much ended the career, I think, but as it turned out I went into Nicaragua, this was the only job, this is, you know, getting back in the summer and not having lined up a job, chances are pretty slim that you're going to get anything decent, certainly nothing overseas, but this was a Sandinista, Nicaragua, and the number two position and basically at a dead end embassy. But I grabbed it because I liked difficult assignments. But what was interesting, of course, four months later Violetta Chamorro defeats the Sandinistas and suddenly this is a front line embassy and we've got to help old Violetta survive. So I get out there at a very interesting time and had a great tour and got a superior honor award out of it. And then, not to jump too far ahead, but just at that time, of course, the Soviet Union was breaking up, this was in '92, and I volunteered just at the end of, just before the end of the Nicaragua assignment to go out and open up embassies in Central Asia, which again helped the career tremendously. So I bounced back.

Q: Well I always think of people who end of in dead end jobs. An interview I did was with Joe Wilson, who ended up as DCM in our embassy in Baghdad, which was considered- he wanted to be the Africa watcher in Paris.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, a chushy job.

Q: He got- what?

MCWILLIAMS: Not a bad job.

Q: Yes, but he got beaten out of that so he took this job as DCM in a dead end place which had nothing happening and the next thing you know he's still in the headlines.

MCWILLIAMS: It's luck of the draw.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: In a lot of those assignments.

Q: So you get the- Well this is probably a good place to stop. So we'll pick this up in 1989.

MCWILLIAMS: '89, yes.



Q: '89 when you're going to Nicaragua as DCM.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, not really because there again we had a chargé d'affaires because there was a Sandinista-run regime so we didn't have a full ambassador there.

Q: Okay. So we'll pick up that whole interesting thing up the next time.

MCWILLIAMS: Okay. Very good.

Q: Great.

MCWILLIAMS: Thank you.

Q: Okay. Today is the 6th of January. Is this the epiphany?

MCWILLIAMS: This is the epiphany, this is Little Christmas.

Q: This is Little Christmas.

MCWILLIAMS: Or it's actually Major Christmas for the Greek- Russian Orthodox, we call it a-

Q: Yes. Anyway, so we're going to start with the- Nicaragua. You were there, in the first place, you were from '89 to when?

MCWILLIAMS: Well actually, I did language training until early '90.

Q: Okay.

MCWILLIAMS: And I think I arrived in Nicaragua around February- because the Sandinistas were still actually in charge so I think it was February of 1990.

Q: Okay. And you were there until when?

MCWILLIAMS: Until January of '92.



Q: Okay. First, usual thing, what was the situation in Nicaragua when you- as you went out there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, let me just back up slightly because I obtained the job as I said in our last discussion, I got the job essentially it was a job that no one wanted. It was the number two person in the Sandinista post, it was going nowhere and not very interesting for, especially for political officers, but because of the circumstances in which I left there was really no other good jobs available so I was fairly happy with that choice. I'd worked in difficult assignments before, basically with regimes that were antagonistic to the United States, I thought this would be an opportunity to get back to that which I knew. But then in the fall of '89 we had the elections in which Violetta Chamorro defeated the Sandinista candidate, Daniel Ortega, and that changed things dramatically of course, so I went into an embassy that was at that point just gearing up to assist in any way possible this new government which had been democratically elected which we had great hopes for as a replacement for the Sandinista regime.

Q: Well, what had you picked up about until the election the rule of the Sandinistas? How had they operated and how effective, non-effective were they and then about the contras and all these things that were going on?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I'm glad you asked that because it sort of impacts on what I think I'd like to say generally about that tour. But I was pretty much a prisoner of what our government had been saying about Nicaragua, indeed what was principally portrayed in the media, that is to say a regime that had been too close to the Soviets and of course to Cuba, especially to Cuba and that had been a violator of human rights, that had not been good for the Nicaraguan people. And I pretty much accepted that so that I, along with I think everyone else in Washington for the most part welcomed the surprising victory of Violetta Chamorro and saw this as a very interesting challenge, that is to work with a new government that was pro-U.S., which we would obviously seek to assist.

Q: But when you were talking to people at the desk and all this, in the first place did you find, I mean, was there sort of a feeling of elation and boy now we can really get going?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, pretty much, I think that was it. I should say I came to this experience with essentially no background in Central America or Latin America; all of my experience had been in Asia or in Moscow and even in Moscow it was pretty much focused on Asian issues. So this was kind of a Tabula Rasa for me, having to learn Spanish, which is an easy language but I'm not particularly good with languages. But also I didn't really have a sense of the history of the Nicaraguan struggle and I think that was one of the things that was missing as I went down there. I had to sort of learn once I arrived and it took me a year or so to really understand what was going on.

Q: So who was our, not our ambassador but our-

MCWILLIAMS: When I went down first Jack Leonard, a very able guy who had endured the final months of the Sandinista regime, a very prickly relationship, and I think I was his deputy for four or five months and then because of the change in regime it was seen necessary to bring in an old hand who would be able to address the new challenges of a government with which we were seeking to work, obviously, and they brought in Ambassador Shlaudeman, who had gone into retirement but was I think out of retirement, I don't think he willingly, a very interesting fellow, and he was the ambassador through the rest of my tour.

Q: Yes. He had served in Paraguay and Chile and then had a little respite of Venezuela at the time.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes. He was a remarkable man in many ways. I always remarked that he was fluent in Spanish, could converse with anyone at any level and yet he spoke with an absolute lack of Spanish accent, it was entirely an American accent but he was fluent. And I basically, I think that's where my Spanish, such as it was, went as well.

Q: Well let's talk about when you got there. In the first place, did you get any feel at the desk or something about, I mean, you'd come out of two of our sort of elite bureaus, dealing with the Soviets and with East Asia and Latin America's always been off to one side although Nicaragua ended up in the center of our attention it was only for one of these little periods and ARA, I won't say backwater but it was not just, it was damned close to being a backwater.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, to be honest, I spent so little time in Washington before that tour, I think it was only, well in training about six months and most of that was focused on language, I didn't really get to know the people in ARA very well, not that it was a bad relationship but I didn't really get into the culture of it, and I don't recall anything that suggested to me a difference in bureaus. I just wasn't in Washington long enough to feel that.



Q: Well then, what was, you got to Nicaragua to Manama, not Manama-

MCWILLIAMS: Managua. Managua.

Q: I was just talking to somebody who was ambassador to Bahrain that's why.

MCWILLIAMS: Alright, that's not going to work, no.

Q: But anyway, you got there, what was your initial impression?

MCWILLIAMS: Well first of all it was a very, very tiny embassy. I think we maybe had eight or 10 people in the embassy minus the Marine security guard, vastly under staffed. I remember one of our first problems was the arrival of Vice President Quayle and an entourage that outnumbered the embassy by four or five times. But it was essentially very interesting time. We had direct access to the new government and we had a very difficult but nonetheless workmanlike relationship with the outgoing Sandinista government. But I recall being particularly impressed as we developed the relationship with the new people that we had really a very direct relationship with the president and a man who was essentially her prime minister. I recall that President Chamorro threw a birthday party for Jack Leonard and it was essentially her personal family and the small embassy staff, maybe a total of 15 people, and she cooked and she brought out the birthday cake singing to Jack and then we went over for drinks and I was supposed to be the bartender but she saw I was working too slowly so she got behind the bar so she and I bartended, me and the president. A story I like to tell. But I mean, it was a very personal relationship. Of course she was a very wonderful woman, a very warm, delightful woman. But we had a very intense personal relationship for the first couple of months with the Lacayo administration but that changed.

Q: Lacayo was?



MCWILLIAMS: This was Antonio Lacayo who was her son-in-law and I suppose I might as well get into it, what struck me was that this was a Miami government. Essentially these were people who had fled the Sandinista control and basically were business people, some of them with something of a shady reputation that had come back in triumph-less essentially, but there was a very significant divide between this ruling elite, which had been displaced and was now back in place and the people of Nicaragua, who- the vast majority of whom of course were very poor, had very little access to any source of power. So it was a dichotomy. In a very real sense the Sandinistas were much closer to the people. The only one on the anti-Sandinista side who had very close contact with the people, this guy named Enrique Bermudas, a former Contra general, who I think genuinely sought to represent the interests of the poor, particularly his old Contra troops in the new administration, and he was brutally murdered in an episode that I think still has never been fully investigated. But he was emerging as a, to some extent a political force that challenged not only the pro-U.S.A. government but also the Sandinistas. He was sort of a middle force. He was beginning to draw support from the countryside and I think that scared people, both in the Lacayo-Chamorro administration and within the Sandinistas. In any event he was murdered.

But what I came to see over my years and I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit but, I had a growing realization that the Chamorro administration which we were supporting to the hilt was working much more for large high level business interests in Nicaragua and had very little sympathy for the poor, which was ironical in a sense because clearly Violetta Chamorro's mandate had come from the poor. They regarded her as I think she was, a very honest person, something of a martyr who had stayed in Nicaragua for the most part of the Sandinista regime and who was regarded almost in a religious way. And yet I didn't find her administration, particularly in the attitude of some of the people that worked...

Q: This is tape four, side one with Ed McWilliams. Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, I spoke, I said that she was of the old liberal elite. She was in fact of the Granada conservative elite. There was a liberal elite that was based in Leon but there was very little effort, I think, to respond to the obvious needs of the poor in Nicaragua by her administration.

Q: Well you say we came in there to support her to the hilt but I would assume that would include pushing and shoving the administration to build up her power base, her government's power base by going out to the countryside and-



MCWILLIAMS: No, not really. What I think we were interested in doing was essentially dealing with the economic crisis but at a macro level not a micro level. They had tremendous problems with national debt and so on. And her power base as it developed and as we sought to develop it was largely based in the small towns. They had a system of mayors who were pretty well connected and as these conservative, relatively conservative and some liberal mayors began to develop their power base we attempted to link that power base to her. But as time grew on that power base was more and more of the liberal strain and that's in Nicaraguan term and not a U.S. term, that is to say based on Leon, so there was a growing political divide between the Chamorro administration and the largely liberal based mayors who were becoming a political force as I left. The Sandinistas were sort of separate from all of that, that was the radical side. So you had in Nicaragua and I think to some extent you still have today liberals, conservatives and radicals with the Sandinistas being the radicals.

Q: Well now what, the Sandinistas were voted out. What role were they playing? Ortega, Daniel Ortega was minister of defense wasn't he or something?

MCWILLIAMS: Humberto, actually?

Q: What?

MCWILLIAMS: His brother Humberto was minister of defense.

Q: Humberto. But I mean a very peculiar situation.

MCWILLIAMS: Well I should say something about the election. As it became clear, the United States, much as it is doing today played a very significant role in that election by giving funding through IRI and DI and-

Q: Well, these are, IRI?



MCWILLIAMS: The International Public Institute, NDI and the Democrats, a lot of money went into that campaign in particular the Republicans, the IRI side funded some of the more conservative candidates so the Sandinistas' complaint, and I think with some justification, that this was an election, essentially a fair election over which Jimmy Carter observed, that nonetheless was very heavily influenced in the campaign period by the U.S. And in any event the Sandinistas were defeated in a relatively close election. But the point being that the Sandinistas retained 35 to 40 percent, very strong support among the population, indeed I think it's probably stronger now. And as a consequence the Sandinistas remain very significant political players. They were not defeated in any real sense, they remain players. And through the two years that I was there, almost two years, they repeatedly sought to exert their influence through regular political challenges in the parliament but also, I remember very distinctly, several demonstrations and one particular incident where they basically locked down Managua. I was leaving my house to go to the embassy and suddenly I encountered barriers all over the city. I literally spent an hour or two finding my way through back streets to get to the embassy because the people had erected these barricades. I forget, frankly, what the issue was but it was obviously at the behest of the Sandinistas. And what was clear to me at that point was that the number of people still supporting the Sandinistas was very extensive, that they could bring these people out to do all of this work, you know, literally taking up the cobblestones to make a brick barrier across the road or burning tires but also that they could carry this off without any hint to the U.S. embassy or to the government that this was about to take place. It transpired literally overnight. And I was impressed with the sense of organization and discipline that they displayed in Managua. But of course that strength extended throughout the countryside to a significant extent too.

Q: Well did we have a policy of ignoring the Sandinistas or going on and saying okay, they're a force here, we're going to deal with them as we would in any democratic country?

MCWILLIAMS: More the former than the latter. One of the great debates in the embassy at that time was the relationship that we would have with the Indonesian (sic) military. And we had a defense attaché<sup>1/2</sup> who rather bravely but I think in many ways in an unfortunate way sought notwithstanding out politics to maintain and even expand slightly the relationship that the defense attaché<sup>1/2</sup>'s office had with Umberto Ortega, who remained minister of defense, at least in charge of the army, we should say. And his, I think his rather narrow perspective was that military should deal with other militaries, the problem being that the Ortega brothers, both Daniel and Umberto, were I think pretty genuinely and correctly regarded as rogues. The Sandinista movement consisted of very well meaning, well motivated people who simply wanted to help the poor and then a leadership which was quite corrupt in many ways. And I think Umberto and Daniel both were and remain to some extent corrupt leaders. But nonetheless there was a structure within the Sandinistas below that leadership that accounted for the fact that so many people still valued their Sandinista ties.



Q: Well, was there sort of a- I understand it got played up big in our press when the Sandinistas came in they took over the fancy houses and things like that. Was there a disassembling of this sort of thing or what was happening?

MCWILLIAMS: That's interesting, it's a good question because it sort of highlights the relationship that gradually grew between the Lacayo administration under Chamorro and the Sandinistas. There was tremendous concern in Washington about how property would be returned to rightful owners, in quotes "rightful owners". These were people, basically Miami people, people from Dallas and so on who had fled Nicaragua but still held title to very significant property, also genuine U.S. citizens who had interests in Nicaragua. So there was as we began to move forward with the Chamorro-Lacayo administration an attempt on our part to bring these properties back to what we considered to be their rightful owners. There was some resistance to this and that resistance grew within the Lacayo administration because in point of fact Lacayo and the Ortega's began to strike deals. Perhaps recognizing the real power that the Sandinistas still had in Nicaragua Lacayo and the Ortegas began to reach deals on these properties. Some were returned, some were not. And of course you had the popular concern that a lot of these people would be returning to vast plantations that in fact, or ranches, that had been developed under Sandinista rule and people were living on these plantations eking out a living as small agriculturalists. So it was a very complex situation, a lot of pressure from conservative elements in the U.S. Congress to resolve this problem but obviously very complicated situation on the ground as it was in Nicaragua.

Q: Well land, of course, you know, is probably I guess then one of the most important things in any political situation. While you were there what was happening? I mean, if the plantations had been broken up and you know, the peasants had been allowed to put their own plots in, what was happening to them?

MCWILLIAMS: Well this was essentially the problem. And I would say not only the peasants but a lot of those who had taken land, basically squatters, who had taken land were armed Sandinistas but also the Contras who were coming back from their years in Honduras and so on and they were making land claims. I'd mentioned earlier Enrique Bermudas and he very much reflected their concerns, that these people needed to make a living, they needed land, both the Sandinistas and the Contras, he was in some ways representing both interests, rural agricultural interests against these dominant land lords who had spent most of the Sandinista period in the United States.

Q: Was anything, I mean, while you were there were we, this sounds like a can of worms to play with, did we jump into that can?



MCWILLIAMS: Well I can remember once Ambassador Shlaudeman arrived and shortly after his arrival we'd assembled to brief him and we were talking about the intricacy of the politics of Nicaragua which of course he knew very well. But at the end of the briefing I remember him saying you know, there's a train wreck that you guys are missing and that is that train that's barreling down the tracks from Congress, that they're going to demand that this land go back to the original owners and we're going to be in confrontation not only with the Sandinistas who are reluctant to give it up but with the Lacayo regime, Lacayo administration which is increasingly reluctant itself to turn these properties over. So it was a political reality in our policy and very much a political complication for our policy.

Q: Well now, your job was, became DCM?

MCWILLIAMS: No. I went in as the second rank- well again, like an acting DCM as I was in Kabul and I was to be in Tajikistan but when Ambassador Shlaudeman moved in we had a real DCM come in, whose name is going to escape, it's a shame, but then I was just, I just became political consular and I had a five-person staff, a really great staff that worked with me on this.

Q: Well one, did you find there was any carryover from your previous experiences to the political situation in Nicaragua?

MCWILLIAMS: Well you know I think in one sense yes. I don't think it really manifested itself tremendously in my role there because genuinely- generally I think I was- I had a very good relationship with Ambassador Shlaudeman. I got a superior honor award out of it and all that. But I think probably well into my second year probably I began to have some sense that the best interests of the people of Nicaragua was not necessarily represented by the Lacayo administration. And I certainly had no brief for Daniel or Umberto Ortega but I recall one time, I like to do street stuff, that was sort of throughout my career I like to go out and see what the people are doing and sense what's going on in the streets, and there was scheduled to be a massive rally down in the ruins of an old cathedral in Managua, a Sandinista rally. So I went down to cover it and it was a drenching rain, just monsoon rain for a couple of hours and the Sandinista leadership, Daniel himself was supposed to appear, hadn't appeared, hadn't appeared and yet there were thousands of people standing in a very cold rain and the enthusiasm never just never waned. Constant chanting and singing and banners flying and so on and then the Sandinista leadership, neat and dry and warm finally did arrive and got up on the stage and so on. But over the course of maybe an hour-and-a-half, two hours of waiting for this it dawned on me that these people are very, very loyal to something, that there is a very strongly felt feeling for what the Sandinistas at least claim to represent.



Now, on the other side you found a lot of affection for Donna Violetta, Violetta Chamorro. But- and it was indeed intense but I didn't find that as a political manifestation rather almost a personal attachment and love for this very, very good woman. But on the other side you had this commitment to ideals and perspective among the poor that was extremely strong. And I sensed at that point, and I think it influenced the rest of my career, that there is something that you should look for within the people that is more important than necessarily what we are doing in our offices. And it was very clear in this instance.

Q: What about while you were there, there's a term that the Sandalistas, these are the glitterati, the young people who come out, the idealistic people from the United States, nuns, lots of nuns I guess were there. I mean, what was happening there, was this a-?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, most of the Sandalistas, I never really used that term very much, I think they probably resent it, we would have, I remember particularly in the early days of my tour down there, American citizens who had been with the Sandinistas sometimes for years in Nicaragua coming in to voice complaints about what was going on, mistreatment of some of the people that they had been working with for years, and it was a little awkward because of course these were American citizens whose complaints we had to listen to but nonetheless this was not U.S. policy. And I must admit I think in those early months we gave them fairly short shrift, recognizing that at least in that Bush administration, Bush I, that there wouldn't have been much price to pay if in fact someone were to go back and complain that we hadn't given them a good hearing. We were polite but I don't think it was much more than that.

Q: Did we get involved at all in looking at atrocities and trying to uncover things of this nature there? You know, we're going on all the time in that whole part of the world.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. And again, sort of working off of my old experience I was, I worked very closely with a number of people, including some Nicaraguans who were seeking to reveal the Sandinista atrocities and certainly there were Sandinista atrocities, killings and mistreatment and so on. And the early months of my assignment there very much focused on efforts to go, I recall, way out into the countryside to explore for unmarked graves and so on of Sandinista victims, that sort of thing, and taking testimony from people who could at least make assertions about very specific individuals within the Sandinista hierarchy that were responsible for abuses and so on. I did a lot of that but in the context of doing that, of course, you would stumble upon Contra atrocities as well and to my regret now I think I didn't play fair. That is to say I would report what evidence I found of Sandinista atrocities and would not reflect very deeply on the impact of the importance of reporting the Contra atrocities.



Q: I take it, please correct me if I'm wrong, that because the election was a real election and it wasn't a complete takeover, that there wasn't sort of revenge, that there wasn't much room for revenge time and that sort of thing.

MCWILLIAMS: One of the great debates, and it's a good question because we faced it somewhat in Afghanistan as well and in Indonesia, is the debate as to whether or not we should be or the society should be seeking justice or whether in the interest of peace just allow those things to pass. And that was, I recall, a pretty fierce debate within Nicaraguan society. I think the only thing I walked away from that, at least reflecting back was with the notion that this is a question for the society and should not be a question over which we would seek to have any influence. I would say that's the same in, subsequently in East Timor and Indonesia but essentially it's for the society to make that decision. If the international community not knowing all of the implications of that decision, the consequences of that decision shouldn't be involved, it's a societal question.

Q: Did you get any feel about the train wreck that was coming? I mean, when one thinks of Nicaragua one can't help but go back to the Somoza period and you had the Somozas' roommate who was a congressman and you know, you had a very strong Nicaraguan lobby in Congress.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: And not a very thoughtful one, I mean, one just whatever Somoza wants, Somoza gets. Did you get any feel for, was there anything like that in Congress?

MCWILLIAMS: Well I think more than that was the antipathy to everything Sandinista. You have to remember through the whole Reagan administration to a very real extent our- Nicaragua was the touchstone of our policy in the region and the determination not to give the Sandinistas any quarter and to give full tilt support, rather simplistically to the Chamorro administration was a very dominant perspective not only in Congress but also in the administration right up until the time I left. I think there was very little truck for the Sandinistas although I think at the time of my departure there was a growing realization that within the Lacayo bureaucracy there were growing indications of a *détente*, if you will, with the Sandinista leadership that entailed actual business ventures that involved both senior levels in the Lacayo administration and the Sandinistas.

Q: What about American business interests? You know, one goes back to the Banana Republics and the United Fruit-type things. I mean, what was, anything of that going on?



MCWILLIAMS: I don't remember too much about that aspect of it. Obviously as I mentioned earlier in addition to claimants on old, old property claims by Nicaraguans who'd fled to the United States there were also a lot of U.S. property claims and those we had no alternative but to insist on although as I say we met resistance over the months from the Lacayo administration. But I don't recall too much going on in the economic front. I do recall on the AID side working rather closely with a very good AID staff down there but somewhat frustratingly our assistance was largely at the macro level, trying to balance accounts and so on. And what troubled me was, particularly as I traveled and I traveled very extensively while I was out there, the incredible poverty and the incapacity of the Lacayo administration to respond to that poverty and our own, I think, insensitivity to address very clear medical needs, educational needs and so on throughout the countryside was a frustration for me. I can recall numerous conversations with the AID people, pleading with, I recall at one point some sort of assistance to a hospital that I visited on the Caribbean coast and essentially AID and the U.S. government were not interested in the kind of assistance at the micro level that I think was needed and would have made a difference politically.

Q: Did you have the feeling that, okay, you had this election, everybody was very delighted with the United States, I mean, but at the same time, okay, that's done, let's move on somewhere else. In other words, because at one point we were putting a hell of a lot of effort into El Salvador and-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: -and those places.

MCWILLIAMS: No, there was very strong interest in seeing to it that Lacayo's, the Lacayo administration, I should say the Chamorro administration succeeded, both in terms of visits of senior level officials and as I say in terms of assistance but I continued to feel that USAID misdirected the assistance in not getting down to the micro level sufficiently to make a difference in terms of the vast poverty of the place.

Q: Did you think that this was, I mean, this is obviously your own analysis but was this because an attitudinal mindset of aid or was this Washington or what was it?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I'm afraid I share the perspective, I think of a lot of my colleagues who work in the political area, particularly that USAID too often does not respond to the very real practical needs of a society but rather deals at the macro level and as a consequence does not-our programs, our assistance do not have the political impact that they might have had had we designed it differently.



Q: What about the role of the CIA? I mean, this was obviously, the CIA had been in this thing up to its neck and, you know, I mean, not because of directives in Washington. I mean, I'm talking about Central American. How did you find them at that point?

MCWILLIAMS: I think I was, I simply didn't have much contact with the CIA infrastructure that had been there presumably before. When I walked in, again our posture was pretty much aboveboard assistance to a regime that we liked. And therefore the role of the CIA at that point was reduced significantly, I think, in terms of personnel, in terms of scope of action. I don't think that they were particularly active.

I'll tell you one thing that always intrigued me. One of the early jobs that we had in the political section was in getting the old Contras to give up their weaponry, give their weapons back to us, essentially. And in particular I remember there were Red Eye missiles, these are ground to air missiles to take down aircraft, and we were particularly anxious for good reason, to get those things back in our control. And it fell to one of the offices in my political section to basically go out and make deals whereby we would give motorboats, little tractors, well digging equipment and so on, trade, in other words it wouldn't be cash but trade for these Red Eyes. And I can recall this officer who was a brilliant officer going out into the countryside, getting his hands on one of these things, you wouldn't bring it back to the embassy, he would dig a hole, put in kerosene, lumber, burlap, whatever, throw that thing in there and cook it off as he would phrase it and just let it blow. I remember a couple of times he invited me out to witness a couple of these operations and I didn't go, unfortunately; I'd loved to have gone out, it's a great story. But it always occurred to me as strange that the CIA wasn't more involved in doing this.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: But that actually fell to us. So I think in a real sense the CIA at that point was not playing a major role.

Q: Yes, I can't remember where, if it had gotten a bloody nose on various things in Central America.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, sure it has, as has our military, yes.

Q: It may have wanted to back off.



MCWILLIAMS: And I suspect that the CIA infrastructure was never really probably in Nicaragua. That is, it was operating out of Honduras or El Salvador and probably was not much of a presence ever in Nicaragua.

Q: What about, let's talk about the Catholic Church.

MCWILLIAMS: The Catholic Church had Archbishop Obando Bravo, I stumbled the name there, a very knowledgeable, sage, relatively young priest, in many ways very much like Bishop Bello in East Timor in the sense that throughout the Sandinista period he was clearly not an advocate for the Sandinistas but at the same time was not their adversary. He survived that relationship and Obando Bravo in our administration, during the administration that I was there, was sometimes a critic of the Lacayo administration, I think quite genuinely wed to the interests and the needs of the poor and I think the Church in general played a remarkable role thanks to a significant extent to his leadership. And of course subsequent to my departure Pope John Paul made his second visit to Nicaragua; he had come at the latter part of the Sandinista administration and was perceived to have actually chastised some of the priests who were working with the Sandinistas, even ministerial level positions. But he, I think the Church in general, while not seen, particularly under John Paul's leadership, as particularly close to the poor in Nicaragua was seen as quite close to the poor because Bishop Obando Bravo, I can't recall if he was bishop or archbishop when I was there, had a very close relationship with the people.

Q: What about the foreign elements of the Church? Because they had gotten, if I recall, the Maryknoll name keeps popping up, but gotten very close to the-

MCWILLIAMS: Sandinistas.

Q: -to the Sandinistas and all. Was there a problem there or readjusting or what was that situation?

MCWILLIAMS: Well nothing that I think came to the attention of the U.S. embassy. Of course when the Sandinistas left power a lot of those Americans and other foreigners who had supported them tended to drift away. But I don't recall having any direct contact, for example, U.S. citizens who were members of the clergy, although I'm sure that did happen, but that didn't constitute a major item for our work.



Q: You mentioned shortly after you arrived Vice President Daniel Quayle and an entourage arrived. How did that go? I mean, Daniel Quayle does not, I mean was, he had the reputation of being sort of a joke.

MCWILLIAMS: Well no, I think that's, I've always thought that was sort of unfair. No, I think, I recall him as being first of all a very pleasant man who and indeed his entire delegation fully understood that we were not staffed for that kind of a visit and it was as I recall and I forget the circumstances but it came very suddenly. I guess it was in connection with her inauguration. And I do recall, now that you ask, having to deal with the Sandinista administration about the upcoming visit of Dan Quayle to Nicaragua. And I must say that the Sandinistas, although extremely prickly, were professional and efficient in preparing us, helping us prepare for that visit. But I just recall us being overwhelmed by this visit. But no, I think in general terms Quayle impressed me certainly and I think the rest of the staff as being, first of all, a very pleasant fellow and not at all, according to his reputation, that is to say foolish or uninformed.

Q: How about visitors coming? Did you have any particular problems with visitors?

MCWILLIAMS: Well there were lots of CODELs and staff dels that would come down. None of them are particularly memorable except one. I remember Congressman Rohrabacher from California came in and he was interested in the work that had been done in my section particularly about finding unmarked graves of Sandinistas. And he and I, with a driver, went out one midnight way off into the boonies to try to actually dig up one of these graves by the moonlight. And I've always thought that one of my more unusual experiences with a congressman, digging unsuccessfully I might add, by a wall up in the boonies in Nicaragua trying to find remains.

Q: What was his interest?

MCWILLIAMS: He wanted to prove and come back with the proof, press conference the next morning and so on, that here is proof, here are the remains of this poor anti-Sandinista fellow who was killed by the Sandinistas. And thankfully we didn't come up with any remains.

Q: What about, I would think that immigration, visas and all that, was that a problem there? Because you know, an awful lot of people had fled to the United States and were claiming political asylum and all of a sudden the game had changed.



MCWILLIAMS: Well I can remember very heavy traffic of Nicaraguans between Miami and Managua. We had a very large consular section. I don't recall, I realize they were very busy. The only thing I can recall specifically is that I often was in conflict with the head of the consular section because I would be seeking favors, frankly, any Foreign Service officer will recognize this, seeking favors for particularly important contacts, getting a visa for this cousin or that nephew and so on and getting into terrible shouting matches with the consular chief. And in particular I recall one of my major contacts, actually, was really quite a hustler in retrospect. I did a lot of favors, or at least was asked to do a lot of favors for this fellow, and in retrospect I think the consular officer was probably more right than I was in rejecting some of his requests.

Q: Well, having been a former consular general from places where visas, particularly Korea and all where I got in shouting matches, oddly enough with the political consular, it could almost be a pattern.

MCWILLIAMS: I think actually, reflecting back, this was sort of a unique experience for me because I'd work in, of course, in Vientiane where there was no consular issues to speak of in those terms, Bangkok where I didn't get involved with that, Moscow, of course; this was the first time where I basically had a government with which we were very close making requests to me and I sort of saw it as, naively, as my responsibility to get those requests channeled through this, to the administration in my embassy and it didn't always work. Anyway, it was a new experience for me, a very painful one but I think I learned over time.

Q: What about the, was there a Miami-Cuban refugee connection there or not? I mean, did the Cubans, I mean, there were two Cubans, I mean, the Castro Cubans and the anti-Castro Cubans. Did either of them play any role while you were there?

MCWILLIAMS: No. No. Of course, the Sandinista-Cuban connection was always something that concerned us deeply and in that context obviously the Miami Cubans lined up with the Miami Nicaraguans, if you will. But I don't recall Miami Cubans playing any significant role though I suspect that they were important, very important allies in the U.S. Congress for the interests of the Miami Nicaraguans.

Q: Well, before we leave this thing were there incidents, developments or something that you think of ?



MCWILLIAMS: I think the only thing that was important for me in that assignment, which was really an out of area assignment, I had no experience going in to that area, to that region but I think again, as I tried to describe this earlier, I began to be a little bit more sensitive to criticism or critique of U.S. policy based upon the reactions to that policy of the people themselves. And again, a sensitivity to a need to look at our policy and how it was impacting not only the elites but the local population. This became much more important to me in a subsequent assignment to Indonesia and I drew on that experience in Nicaragua I think very much to shape my role in that position in Indonesia subsequently, which was important for my career.

Q: What about, I mean you had had the Soviet experience and all, and you know, you had the Ortigas running around with Soviet-style uniforms on and all, but did you find that this wasn't a Kremlinology enclave. I mean, was this really a different-?

MCWILLIAMS: I think the Sandinista leadership, Daniel and Umberto, drew upon Soviet support but I don't think in retrospect that they took a lot of direction from the Soviets. This I think was essentially an opportunistic approach by the Soviets to create problems for the U.S. in its own backyard but in terms of a broad threat to security in the region and so on I don't think so. I think the Soviets were essentially maintaining a client state much as we subsequently began to do once Lacayo came in, Chamorro.

Q: Well the Ortigas had not really established what you could call a real communist regime would you say-

MCWILLIAMS: No.

Q: -or too diverse?

MCWILLIAMS: It was a dictatorship I think you'd have to say and I think they repressed human rights. I think some elements of the Sandinista leadership were genuinely concerned about a populist program which would meet the very obvious needs, economic needs of the people in Nicaragua. But on the other hand, particularly when you look at the wealth that some of the leadership of the Sandinista movement accumulated you have to say it was a corrupt, despotic dictatorship. I think that the violation of human rights were, that problem was nowhere near as extensive as we contended it was in retrospect. Nonetheless it was there, certainly. They were repressive in terms of press rights and so on. But it was a regime that had staying power because essentially it did respond to a very significant need within the populace as perceived by the people. And we're going to deal with the Sandinistas again I think in the next couple of months.



Q: Were the Somozas, were they completely gone?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, they were pretty much gone. The only thing interesting, a couple of politicians were rising as I left. One of them came to be president, actually, who had clear Somoza ties and that had been sort of a red line that the Sandinistas established that the Somozas and those most closely associated with them would not come back to power. This was something that Lacayo and Chamorro essentially signed off on, I think to some extent we signed off on. But in the elections in the middle '90s Somoza-connected people came to power essentially replacing Lacayo-Chamorro and ultimately they themselves began to deal with Sandinistas. It's funny, it seems that no matter what the political evolution has been in Nicaragua the poor always lose out to the rich. They're always sold out by one side or the other. Arnoldo Aleman was the man I was trying to think of who was essentially a liberal with Somoza connections who came to power who was extremely corrupt but again, he made his deals with the Sandinistas. So essentially I think that the people of Nicaragua, the poor, have never really had a good representative and that's kind of sad.

Q: Well then in 1992, whither?

MCWILLIAMS: Well. In the fall of early winter of '91 the collapse of the Soviet Union became apparent and I guess in like December of '91 the State Department started sending out bleats, messages saying anyone with Russian experience, Russian language skills or experience in the Soviet Union that would be interested we're looking to staff these new embassies that will be created in all of these new states as they began to be formed. And inasmuch as my tour was due to end in a couple of months anyway I thought this a very exciting opportunity so I sent my name in, again the embassy very generously was prepared to let me go a month or two early, and initially was given Armenia but in kind of scrum for posts out there I was able to argue that I would be better suited to assignment into Central Asia given my experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So was in the first tier, as they say, of chief submission going out to set up embassies in these states, former states of the Soviet Union.

Q: Alright. Well let's talk- okay, well we're off. '92, what did they do with you?



MCWILLIAMS: We were basically all flown to Frankfurt from various parts of the world, those of us going in on the first tier and we had, I guess two or three days of briefings at the consulate, U.S. consulate in Frankfurt. And that is briefings for those of us who were going out to basically set up these missions. As I recall they were sending us to Belarus, Kyrgyzstan where I went, Armenia and can't remember whether it was Ukraine or Georgia, the other one. In any event, with minimal instructions really, they sent us out and I recall as we met in Frankfurt there was an agreement which became sort of comical but we agreed, all of us, that we would open all of our embassies the same day so that there wouldn't be one embassy opening ahead of the other. That's important later; I'll get to that. But then took off from Frankfurt and flew into Moscow and I remember we almost lost the entire operation as this German aircraft tried to fly in to Moscow airport in a blizzard and with two passes, both having been missed, we were told that well, we can't land because the snow is just too bad, this is at night, so we're going on to Leningrad because if we make a third attempt there will not be enough fuel to get to any airport. So we said well we're off to Leningrad and at that point suddenly we realized no, we're not, we're coming in for that third pass. And it occurred to all of us that if they hadn't landed on that third pass there was no other alternative. Anyway. We landed, we got in and then went off to our posts. And I went to Bishkek.

Q: A quickie. While you were in Moscow did you talk to the embassy there?

MCWILLIAMS: Very, very limited.

Q: Because I was wondering whether you were sensing any kind of resentment that their empire was being destroyed?

MCWILLIAMS: Well there's a little bit to discuss there, yes. Essentially there was where I met up with my team. There were five, four officers going in with me from various branches of the government and-

Q: I'm going to stop here.



MCWILLIAMS: There were four, I think four or five officers going with me out to set up the embassy in Bishkek from a couple of agencies and I do recall only one thing, that we were told that we would be met in Bishkek by an advance officer from the embassy who had been sort of scouting out places where we could live and where we'd set up the embassy and so on. We arrived at night in Bishkek and were greeted very warmly by a small delegation from the government, this was like on a Thursday night, and informed at that point that they expected us to open the embassy the following morning, Friday morning. And I objected, in part because we hadn't even seen the facility, literally we were at the airport when they informed us of this, and then secondly I was concerned that I had made this deal with my colleagues that I wasn't going to open early, we were all supposed to open the next Monday. And as a consequence I objected and said just take us to our hotel, we'll look at the facility tomorrow morning. And I was picked up by the government cars the next morning with senior officials who explained to me that it was the president's wish, President Akayev, or President Akayev's wish, that we open the embassy no later than Saturday, the next day, this is Friday morning, as was explained to me because the Iranian had been left hanging around the city for a couple of weeks and was desperate to open his embassy but the president, Akayev, was determined that the first embassy would not be the Iranian embassy but would be the American embassy. So he said I just cannot wait any longer, you've got to open. So anyway, we opened on Saturday. We inspected the facility on Friday and did some initial hiring as I recall, for staff, and the president appeared at the steps of our building, we had speeches and so on. And it was a very, very warm welcome and I was only there six weeks before I moved on to my next assignment but it was a very interesting period.

I can remember it being desperately cold and we were all sick from the day we arrived. We were in this hotel, the wind literally blew through this place, we were freezing all the time we were there. But as we'd go out to dinner at night, always to restaurants because of course we had no facilities set up invariably when the little tribe of Americans, five or six of us would walk into a restaurant in the city we'd just basically would be swamped by drinks brought to our table and food brought to the table and people coming over for pictures with us and so on, just an extremely warm welcome. The facility we set up was right on a fairly main street and no setback at all, I mean, the building was right on the sidewalk and I chose as my office as chargé d'affaires one of the large, only two really decent size rooms in the building but it was right on the street. As I would be writing at desk, working at my desk, people would walk by and tap on the window and wave at me and I often thought subsequently what the security people would have thought of that arrangement. But we would have flowers brought to the embassy by individual citizens. People just were so anxious to make it known that Americans were welcome in Bishkek. It was just an extraordinarily cordial welcome, both from the officials and from people. A wonderful experience.

Q: What- I know the facility because I went there two years later as a USIA-sponsored person to set up a consular service and I mean, we're really talking about a modest cottage.



MCWILLIAMS: Modest- it was a dentist's office, actually. And one of the interesting things was that it had no functioning loo, there was no toilet facility in there. And the facility that we were relying on was out back in a little shed and literally two holes in the ground. And there was one for the ladies and one for the men and that was the first three or four days before they did come in and eventually fix the toilets in the building but it was hard scrabble for awhile. But as I say, what was most memorable was the warmth of the people.

I recall a fellow coming in, I think on the first Friday we were there and insisting that, and I think this was government help, that we all go off with him to the hills for a falcon hunt. And I always regretted I never took that opportunity, on horseback. Anyway, it was just a lovely experience.

Q: Did you sense any unease about the Russians pulling out? Because many of these Stans actually had been the recipients of more aid than, I mean they, some were exploited and some were exploiters you might say of the Soviet system and \_\_\_\_\_ Kyrgyzstan-

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think Kyrgyzstan was unique. Certainly one of the reasons that we opened in Kyrgyzstan before we opened anywhere else in Central Asia was because the leadership there was deemed to be particularly progressive. It was thought of as the Switzerland of Central Asia. President Akayev was a former medical profession, not a communist apparatchik at all with progressive policies. And I think there was a real hope that something could be developed that would be a model in some ways for some of the other Central American, much richer, much more in some ways important American- Central Asian states. Ultimately that didn't come to pass but I think no, there was no sense of resentment towards Moscow but I think a very clear sense, which we sought to foster, that Bishkek would have its own relationship with America and not through Moscow but directly with us.

I should say one disappointment moment, I had been very impressed with the young fellow who had come in and basically did all the set up for us, finding the building and so on. But learned, I think on the second or third day, that he had prevailed upon our communications person to develop a separate channel of reporting that he would utilize to his embassy in Moscow, which I didn't know about as charg<sup>e</sup> ½, and in fact messages had gone out reporting on the progress that we were making to his chiefs in Moscow, this is State Department, without my knowledge.

Q: Let me get this straight. This is not a CIA man?



MCWILLIAMS: No, this is State. As a matter of fact, I think the reporting was going to the political section chief, which is also kind of discouraging. But I tried not to be too abrupt about that but I didn't want that. I didn't want this embassy being run by or even having anybody on my team reporting-

Q: Well it was part of the mindset too, I guess at the time.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, the whole clientitis thing, as you asked the question as I think about it, that was an early concern when we met in Frankfurt, we chiefs of mission, that we not simply become consulates for the embassy in Moscow. Obviously we would depend entirely on embassy Moscow for our support but we wanted, for political reasons, that these representations not be simply extensions of the embassy in Moscow. And maybe I was being oversensitive but the fact that a couple of reports had gone out even as official informals or whatever they were that I didn't know about bothered me a great deal. So I asked the fellow to leave.

Q: What was sort of the attitude- Secretary of State Baker had made a big play that he wasn't going to ask for extra money and this was by many considered to be a really stupid thing to do. There was a time we could have gotten money and it seemed like a grandstand play. Did you feel this?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think as I recall what he felt he could do was to pull money from other places in State and I suspect that a lot of other embassies were shorted, a lot of other State functions were shorted because of that project. But no, I don't think that we felt particularly put upon, either in Bishkek or subsequently in Dushanbe where I was by lack of support, physical support, because we recognized there were limits. I would say ultimately it was a master stroke on the part of the Bush I administration, of which I'm not a great fan, and Baker specifically, again of whom I'm not a great fan, that they would have moved so quickly. I mean, given the State Department bureaucracy to move so quickly to line up the kinds of people that would man these positions and get them established so, so quickly was I think a tribute to Baker and Bush I and it was really well done.

Q: What was the purpose? I mean here you are sent out to open this up to be charged½ but then to move on? I mean it sounds like, didn't they have enough people to say okay, you'll go there and be charged½ and you'll stay there?



MCWILLIAMS: Well the plan was, as I recall, that you'd have two assignments essentially. One assignment was to get the embassies open and that was sort of an administrative task. And in Bishkek I had a fellow named Boyd Doughty who was the administrative officer who did a wonderful job in getting things organized. And then essentially a more professional team would come in on our heels to actually begin to run the embassies and work the relationship with the new governments. That was sort of the understanding, that I'd go back to Washington and do something else. But I think partly because Bishkek was the most remote effort we were undertaking of that set and the most challenging I think in many ways and the fact that we had done a very good job but I would say principally because we had such a very good welcome by the government, a very, very good welcome, we were regarded, Boyd and I, as having done a good job in Bishkek so when the second tier embassies were notified Boyd and I sort of on the spur of the moment said let's apply for Dushanbe, let's just go down south here and pick up that embassy too. And I think the perception was that well that team get a good job in Bishkek so let them go on to Dushanbe. So we went down to Dushanbe and opened up there in February as I recall, early March.

Q: What was the reception, what was the situation in Tajik-

MCWILLIAMS: Tajikistan.

Q: Tajikistan, in Dushanbe?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that was an entirely different situation, very interesting time. Whereas the leadership had been very solid and well established in Kyrgyzstan, in Tajikistan the old communist leadership had already faced challenges the previously fall from Islamic elements and more democratic elements. We sensed that coming in and in the first week or two we took the opportunity to travel extensively in Tajikistan and I think did some good color reporting but also at the same time picked up growing tension in Tajikistan from these Islamics and also democrats who were united with them against the old communist leadership. What developed within I'd say two to three weeks of our presence there, we moved into a hotel as our embassy, one floor of a hotel which we gradually expanded into, but a demonstration began in the central square, not unlike what we saw in the Ukraine in Kiev last year, people just basically not leaving, protesting the government and the very shaky communist apparatchik regime was unable to really deal with this threat and ultimately I recall-just a second-we were very troubled by this and I think this is a failing in Washington, we had very little response from State Department to our reporting, I think rather good reporting, of this developing crisis of authority in Tajikistan.



I recall one afternoon the foreign minister, whom I had become quite close to took me on a walk in the sort of enclosure where the Soviets used to run things but basically it was almost like a green zone as in Baghdad, a safe area for the government, and he called me out there and we went for a long walk. He said we're not going to talk in my office. And his question very directly to me was how will Washington react if we use force against this massive demonstration which is now we feel threatening our government? And I said that I had no instructions but that my understanding would be what I would anticipate would be is that our feeling, our position would be that they should not use force, that they should seek to negotiate and that by all means not turn what had been a Soviet-style security force against the people who were up 'til that point demonstrating peacefully.

Q: I might say this is about three years after Tiananmen Square?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes, this would be-

Q: And so Tiananmen Square was very much-

MCWILLIAMS: This would be April '92, roughly. I don't think I specifically thought of Tiananmen. What I recall from that long walk in sort of like early spring in Dushanbe was first of all my surprise that I was being asked this question so directly. In any event I gave that response and then of course went right back to the embassy and got a message out to Washington saying I've just been hit with this and I've told him that my initial response was this but he should take this as a personal response, that I will immediately go back to the embassy and get a more formal response. And that went out on a Friday. And of course looking into a weekend but I sent it out with all the necessary bells and whistles. I had no response, nothing, not even acknowledging that they'd gotten the message. And it was well into I believe Monday or Tuesday of the next week before I got a message back saying well yes, that's probably the right thing to say but nothing specific on what was really a fairly desperate message from the administration to the Americans as to what they should do with this demonstration.



So I went back to the foreign minister and said, rather sheepishly, well I do have finally gotten a response and it's pretty much along the lines of what I offered you initially. So essentially the administration did not use force, at least not initially, it was essentially the Islamics and the democrats who began to move and actually moved into parliament and took over the main parliament building. I don't recall there being any severe bloodshed but clearly they had used force first. I reported this and message coming back, and this was back say at 8:00, 9:00 in the evening, this was after they had moved in that afternoon to take over the parliament, well go down to the parliament and see what it is they want. So I felt that rather a risky thing at night because it was a very tense town but I went down and actually got into the parliament, people were swirling around, very chaotic, no signs of authority, and went looking inside the parliament building for the leaders and did come upon some of them whom I'd gotten to know in the weeks previous and ascertained that their intent was peaceful but they felt they were going nowhere with the demonstration and so on. So I went back and reported this to Washington and I recall specifically a message coming back almost immediately asking for a few more details, could I go back down. I said no, I can't, this is too dangerous, it's after midnight, this is not going to happen.

But as the crisis evolved and as fighting began outside of the city in certain places I was really desperate for U.S. attention to the situation and strangely and perhaps because there were no really, no significant journalist presence there to cover it Washington simply didn't seem to be following this. And eventually I remember sending out an official and formal to the head of the- the director of, I forget what was called but basically the new states effort saying you know, I'm somewhat surprised we haven't had a response, I need something back from you on this, where do you want us, how do you want us to position on this, this is an evolving crisis here? I was concerned about the safety of our own mission, you know, what should I be doing, should I basically be taking steps now? And I think I suggested some ideas as to what we might do. And the message I got back was sort of telling and I've always thought about it as an important lesson for me. There was a strong reaction from the director who chastised me for having written this as an official and formal, didn't I know that many people in the bureaucracy would see this message? It had been obviously implicitly critical of him, that they hadn't got back to us on this. And he gave me some directions but I remember the first part of the message back was essentially criticizing me for not using a more exclusive channel because too many people would see my message critical of him. Anyway, I felt that was a pretty bad performance.

We got our ambassador- I moved in and we opened the embassy in March and then we had our ambassador, Stan Escudero come out in July. He'd served in Iran and spoke Farsi and I think that was very important. He was a very sociable man, bigger than life figure not unlike Nick Thorne, whom I think I mentioned earlier. But I think in many ways a lot more circumspect than Nick. But because he spoke Farsi he made a great hit with the Tajiks. I should say perhaps before he arrived there was a very interesting period.



The United States, both when I was in Bishkek but also in Dushanbe sought to establish a good relationship with these new governments by providing assistance essentially entailing bringing in an air transport with all sorts of foods and medicines and so on basically stuff I think that we didn't really need because the quality of the stuff brought in was of some question. But what they would do is every two or three weeks send in one of these air transports which we'd go out to the airport, unload, put into trucks and then take around to various places in Tajikistan to deliver. Now, this was at a time when conflict had begun. We had a very confused picture throughout Tajikistan with different lines of control, certain factions would control this town, others would control this road to this town and so on, and what we did was to essentially with our convoys of five or six, seven or eight trucks actually move through these lines to our destination to deliver these humanitarian supplies. And what struck me as impressive at that time and still was that invariably, no matter who was manning these lines, whether it was the old communist government apparatchiks or the democrats or the Islamics, we would be able to negotiate our way through these checkpoints essentially to make our deliveries. And two things seemed to be important. One, that it was humanitarian assistance and of course they would inspect what we were carrying but then the second thing was that we were Americans. And at that point all elements seemed to appreciate the fact that they wanted to deal well with the Americans. I thought that was impressive at that time.

Q: Well, what was going on there?

MCWILLIAMS: It was essentially a fight. Initially we thought a democratic-Islamic fight against the old communist apparatchiks and to some extent, of course, I think many of us were sympathetic with that, the old Soviet representatives were being thrown out, it was a natural evolution. But it became very clear after the old Soviet elite fled Dushanbe for the north and the Islamic nominated opposition took over that there was a very heavy Iranian hand in this. The Iranian embassy expanded broadly. There began to be marches in the street in which the Iranians were seen to be participating. Iranian hymns were being hummed and sung as they marched along and so on. It became to some extent menacing for us, not so much that it was anti-American but it was clearly a fact that we were not on close ties with this emerging opposition that had already gained control of the capital of Dushanbe.

Q: Well now, were the Turks trying to do anything at the time? Because this is, you know, they were talking about a greater Turkish influence throughout there.



MCWILLIAMS: Our strategy in Central Asia early on had been to essentially use the Turks as our advancement. The Turks under then-Prime Minister Ozal were very anxious to play this role. I think that they had aspirations of even displacing the Soviets, the Russians in Central Asia with U.S. backing and with NATO backing. In ultimate terms I think this is very unrealistic. Turkey simply didn't have the diplomatic strength, certainly not the economic strength to, by any stretch of the imagination, replace the Russians who still maintained a very important influence in that region. I recall in specific instances where the Turks were under the impression that their language would be mutually intelligible in all of the capitals save Tajikistan, which was Farsi dominated, was Farsi language for base, but in point of fact their language was not intelligible to the local people. But that was our intent, basically, to use the Turks as our advance people but in point of fact the death of Prime Minister Ozal, the sudden death of the prime minister pretty much ended that whole notion but that was the initial expectation.

Q: Now, both in Bishkek but particularly in Tajikistan, did you find yourself running head on against now the Russian embassy and all? I mean, was this a problem there?

MCWILLIAMS: The Russians were slow to reestablish- well, they didn't open an embassy while I was in Bishkek and they were very slow to reestablish in Dushanbe but I think in point of fact that reflected the sense in Moscow that they were not prepared to open an embassy and acknowledge, perhaps, the fact that Tajikistan was no longer theirs. They still obviously had direct with all of the leadership elements, KGB remained a very strong force in Tajikistan so I think that they didn't see a need to actually open an embassy all that soon.

One of the early things that I should reflect on though is as this confrontation between the old Soviet client leadership and the democrats and Islamics grew there was a significant exodus of Russians, Jews, Ukrainians and Germans who had formed a fairly significant element within, particularly the city, a lot of the professional services were run by these people. And I think the growing, as they saw it threat by this Islamic Democratic force propelled a lot of them to leave. And I recall we had initially acquired a staff which was significantly Russian, German and Ukrainian, I guess a few Ukrainians but very much a minority of Tajiks and that was because our staff, the people that had gone in could speak Russian, we could speak Russian, we couldn't speak Tajik, I had limited Dari, Farsi, Tajik capacity. But as a consequence we used Russian as sort of the second language of the embassy and as a consequence we were in direct communication with a lot of these Germans and Russians as they and their families contemplated having to go back to Russia because of the growing threat. So we were quite sensitive to the problems faced by the minorities in Dushanbe and Tajikistan.

Q: One of the things I noticed in Bishkek was how many of sort of the shoe repair shops and all were run by sort of Russians but that the Kyrgys were carrying the briefcases and seemed to have the government jobs, you know.



MCWILLIAMS: I don't recall that specifically. I do recall, well, this is really not in response to your point in Bishkek, extraordinary economic strain that was apparent in the town and as I say it was a peaceful situation, certainly, in contrast with Dushanbe. But you had, I recall we had two women come in to apply to be maids, basically mop pushers in our embassy. And in interviewing them it became apparent that each one of them had a university degree and one had been teaching at a university. And I recall saying well we, you know, we simply can't employ you as maids here, I mean, you have too much experience for that and I recall one of the two of them breaking down in tears, explaining that her husband had had a stroke and there was no other source of employment for them, please could they have this simple job. And it struck me the problems, as the Soviet Union collapsed, for individual people at a personal level was just extraordinary.

Q: Yes. Well now, getting to Tajikistan, had there been much Islamic fundamentalism going on there before?

MCWILLIAMS: I had, when I was in Moscow, I had had the portfolio for Central Asia and I had visited these areas, this was '83-'85 period, and I recall from reporting from that period that particularly in Tajikistan you had more of a, not so much Islamic fundamentalism as we would call today, most of Islam was much more oriented toward-let me stop for a second-a lot of the religious influence that frankly the Soviets have never really concerned about in Tajikistan and generally in Central Asia was Sufism, which essentially entailed what I think analytically would be the analog in Christianity would be a veneration of saints and so on because you would have certain specific spots where individual religious leaders had been buried and so on which were a source of great adoration. And you had huge movements of people often to these sites independent of Soviet control which had the Soviets very concerned. So that was the way religion pretty much had manifested itself in Tajikistan.



However, I noticed in Bishkek and also as I say in, when I was in Dushanbe the Saudis were particularly in flooding that area with Korans. Their influence, their money was moving in very quickly, restoration of mosques and so on but at the same time, particularly in Tajikistan you had an Iranian influence and of course that would be much more the Shiite than the Sunni. But it was a political Islam that gradually took over, I would say rather quickly took over in Tajikistan. But underlying this distinction between the old Soviet apparatchiks and this rising Islamic tide you had, I think, a much more important divide in Tajikistan and indeed throughout Central Asia. You had regions which were integrated into these nation states, Tajikistan and so on, which were never really brought together as a nation. You had in particular in Tajikistan you had people in a place called Garm who were antagonistic to the people in the neighboring area called Kulob. And you had other regions similarly that were divided. You had also an Uzbek minority up in the north, ethnic Uzbek, which was antagonistic to the people in Garm and so on. So what played out was really almost at a tribal level, a really ferocious conflict in which over 50,000 people were killed ultimately.

Q: Ooh.

MCWILLIAMS: But although the, at one level it clearly was anti-communist Islamic democrat, at I think a more fundamental level it was more of a regional conflict among elements within Tajikistan.

Q: Was there any spillover from the problems of Afghanistan?

MCWILLIAMS: Sort of in the reverse. You had some of the Tajik refugees fleeing from Tajikistan into Afghanistan. And I can recall, because of my interest in Afghanistan, I had established contact with some Afghans who were actually in Dushanbe to get some sense of what was going on in Afghanistan and reporting on that basis. And through them I was able to make contact with the leader in Mazar-e-Sharif area. And he controlled the area into which a lot of these Tajik refugees were flowing. He was clearly anxious to make contact with any American official that he could and that relationship, that contact between him and I was much more aggressively sought on his part than my part. But I recall at one point sending a message as these Tajik refugees were fleeing into his territory across the Amu Darya River that America would be very impressed, very concerned with how they were treated, that it would be, it would reflect well on him if these Tajik refugees were well cared for. And in point of fact he did take care of these people, he did send supplies out and so on. But it was only subsequently, quite a few years subsequently as the situation deteriorated in Northern Afghanistan that we began to be concerned about the flow of chaos and insecurity in Afghanistan towards Tajikistan.



Q: Well now, the Soviet- well the Russians had considerable military units down there didn't they?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes they did.

Q: What were they doing?

MCWILLIAMS: Well this was, I think, our great concern, that the Soviet military, the old Soviet now the Russian military establishment, which included a very large base right in the middle of Dushanbe, might become directly involved in this growing civil war. Ultimately, as I recall, the Soviets didn't become directly involved, although they certainly were participants in the fighting. I remember as the civil war developed, now this would have been in the summer after Ambassador Escudero came aboard, I took a number of extended trips into areas where I probably in retrospect probably shouldn't have gone, but I recall one trip to a place which is very close to the Afghan border, where the Russians were engaged, were actually firing on Islamic Democratic forces, essentially in support of the newly establish Kulyab dominated regime which now still controls the government. And I recall approaching the Russians, surprising them and being extraordinarily welcomed by these guys who made references to the fact you can see now we're fighting the Islamics just like we fought the Nazis together, and so on, brothers-in-arms and so on, and being fed a wonderful meal and a lot of alcohol and then sort of a potlatch at we left whereby they wanted to give us gifts, weapons essentially, various sorts of weaponry that they had, lots of weapons that they had, they were supposed to basically put in the trunk of our vehicle and go back with. Anyway, the upshot of this was that we had to return gifts to them and the only gifts we had were our flak jackets so we gave them flak jackets but these drunken soldiers insisted on our demonstrating the effectiveness of those flak jackets and I recall, I was with the CIA chief at the time because he'd never been down there, he wanted to see it so I brought him down there, and he was handed a Russian pistol to fire at one of the officers who was wearing our flak jacket and demonstrate the effectiveness of this. Fortunately he was not so drunk as to actually try. But I remember that whole- But then as we sailed back I anticipated, both of us were quite drunk from this very festive gathering of Russians down on the front against the Islamics, going through the mountains and so on I realized we were going to be going through many checkpoints and who knew at that point what checkpoints they would be? And we had a trunk full of arms behind us. So at one point along these treacherous mountain roads, down below us is the river, I stopped the car and my CIA station chief friend is not doing too well because of the alcohol, anyhow I opened the trunk and I just, without saying anything to him took all of the weapons and threw them into the river down below. I remember him being very angry because he felt that this was a treasure trove because he could go back and report all of this interesting Soviet weaponry that he had collected but I explained to him that, you know, there was just no way we'd get through checkpoints with all that weaponry in the back of our car.



Anyway, that's just one episode but it was a very strange assignment but a very rewarding one. We were evacuated in November of '92, not so much because of the Islamic threat to us but because the civil war was coming to the capital. And in retrospect I think we should have stayed. I voted to stay. I think we could have weathered it. Basically there was a rough couple of days in the capital but we could have survived it. But I was, we were all supposed to go back to the United States in the evacuation but my concern was that we'd never get that embassy open again so what we did was, I got off the plane in Tashkent and we had a wonderful local staff who continued to operate the embassy. There were still a few Americans in country who went to the embassy for consular services. The embassy facility was protected, our warehouses were protected by a very good staff and, thanks to telephone calls between Tashkent and Dushanbe two or three times a day I was able to continue reporting using the embassy facility in Tashkent about what was going on in Dushanbe. And actually went to the inauguration of the new president, which was held in the northern part of Tajikistan which was secure, this was President Rahmonov, in early January as I recall, of '93. And I petitioned long and hard that we get that embassy back open again because we now had a secure government. I recall the embassy, the State Department allowed myself and a few people from Washington to go back in to check out the security in Dushanbe and my plan was to get to the prime minister, which I did immediately because we had good access to the individual, and get his assurances that all the resources of the government would be put to protecting the Americans. And on that promises basically the embassy was reestablished. Unfortunately Ambassador Escudero was delayed coming back because of death threats specifically against the American ambassador but we were able to get the embassy reestablished in February. So we were out from November of '92 to February of '93.

Q: You mentioned Islamic Democratic forces. That seems to be an oxymoron or something, I mean-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, these Islamic forces were very, very much prompted by religious concerns. We were very close with their religious leader who oddly enough was positioned right next to us in a huge mosque and I got to know him quite well. But the Democratic forces were largely forces associated with the Pamiris. This is an ethnic minority who had been discriminated against for years and who made common cause with the Islamic forces although they themselves were sectarian and I can recall certainly enjoyed vodka as well as we did. But nonetheless they were in alliance against the old Soviet apparatchiks that had run the country.

Q: You left there when?

MCWILLIAMS: I left in '94, the summer of '94. I'd been there a little over two years.



Q: Did, were you beginning to say hey wait a minute. Isn't there a place, an embassy for me and all that?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, this gets into another phase of it but in the spring of '94, again I had gotten a superior honor award for my work in Bishkek and also in Dushanbe. And obviously my name was looking pretty good back in Washington because I'd been successful in two embassies and particularly in Dushanbe which had been very difficult moving in and moving out, evacuation. So they had told me that I would be the next ambassador in Turkmenistan and I was apparently the choice of personnel and the bureau. But the person who had been DCM in Pakistan, with whom I had had many conflicts at that point was then executive secretary to Secretary of State Christopher.

Q: Emma Beth Jones.

MCWILLIAMS: Beth Jones, yes. And what I am told is that when my name came across the transom as the expected next ambassador nominee for Turkmenistan she contacted the CIA, reminding them of the role I had played in Islamabad and that assignment was killed. So I once again was in a situation of quickly having to scramble to find a new assignment and reluctantly accepted appointment as diplomat in residence, sort of as a holding position for a year at the University of New Mexico.

Q: Okay, we'll pick that up then. One question though I do want to ask about both when you were in Bishkek and Dushanbe. What about NGOs, non-governmental organizations? I mean, when I was in Bishkek shortly after you were there the place was swamped by every, you know, and missionaries and everything else.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, in Bishkek again, I was only there about six weeks and there was very little, we had some journalists come in but virtually, as I recall, no NGO presence, a few business interests, Canadian and U.S. and gold mining and so on but very limited.

Q: This is tape five, side one with Ed McWilliams. Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. As I say, very little NGO presence that I can recall in Bishkek. And in Dushanbe, of course, because of the insecurity through most of the tour there the NGO presence was very limited, even the diplomatic presence was very limited until really 1994 when we began to see a fairly significant expansion in the diplomatic presence.



Q: Okay. Well, we'll pick this up the next time, 1994 when you're going rather reluctantly out of the Stan country into New Mexico.

MCWILLIAMS: Right.

Q: And we'll pick this up, you were there from '94 to '90-?

MCWILLIAMS: '94 to '95 and then accepted an assignment for Indonesia and began preparation in Bahasa, Indonesia language.

Q: Okay, let's pick it up then. Great.

MCWILLIAMS: Okay.

Q: Today is the 9th of January, 2006. Ed, you want to talk a little about your Tajikistan experience before we move on.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, just couple of things, sort of broader points that I wanted to make. One of the things that I learned as a lesson in Tajikistan was the critically important role of local staff, whom I think I suspect like many of my fellow officers sort of took for granted, that is to say their contribution, but we were fortunate in getting an extremely good staff, selecting carefully in Tajikistan and as a consequence when we evacuated for about four-and-a-half, five months we were able to keep the embassy running in virtually all of its functions simply by monitoring their progress by telephone and actually slipping payments in through the ICRC, things of that sort. But it was a lesson to me that the local staff can be a vital asset.

I would also say though there was a mistake made and it was mostly mine because I did the selection for these new staff as the chief of mission. It was a very strange situation in which the Tajik population was very concerned about their position in society and yet the people who came to us to apply for jobs tended to be the few English speakers in the country and those who could speak Russian, which most of my staff and I could speak. And as a consequence we had mostly Russians and ethnic Germans, a few Jews, for example were on our staff and not that many Tajiks. And that became not a problem but a concern later on. So I think in a situation like that you have to give concern when you're hiring local staff not only to their skills of course but also to ethnic and communal questions that might arise from how you hire a staff. So I want to make that point.



The other point I wanted to make was the whole evacuation episode. We evacuated subsequent to that but this was the first real evacuation of the entire embassy that I'd been involved with, the only one in my career, and I just wanted to make the observation that initially as chargé<sup>1/2</sup> I had resisted ever stronger recommendations from Washington that we consider evacuating as the civil war developed in Tajikistan. Ultimately the ambassador who had just come in a week earlier made the decision to evacuate, I actually voted against evacuation, he invited us to vote on it. I just wanted to point out that inevitably in these situations the Washington experts tend to lean very heavily on evacuation, which I think people in those circumstances should consider because it's not always the right choice. And then also in returning to a place after it's been evacuated that can be extremely difficult because no one back in Washington essentially wants to sign off, take responsibility for saying yes, you can go back in, notwithstanding the circumstances on the ground there's a great reluctance, bureaucratic reluctance to see an embassy re-staffed, at least that's been my experience, because as I say people are reluctant to assume responsibility, in Washington, for repopulating an embassy.

Q: Well, you're talking about responsibility. In Washington you can't lose if you say get out of there because if somebody gets killed or badly hurt-

MCWILLIAMS: Right, absolutely.

Q: -they'd say well we said to get out. I mean, it's covering your ass whereas- and that's for going back, the same thing.

MCWILLIAMS: I think even more so in the latter case because if in fact someone were to have been killed while I was resisting evacuation, frankly the burden would have been on me because it is ultimately the chief of mission's choice. But going back very clearly I agree with you on that and that was my experience as well. What I regretted also, I had several weird experiences, I went back in ahead of my ambassador. I had been parked in Tashkent during evacuation to sort of keep the embassy running from a distance and my team, the rest of my team and the ambassador went back to the United States, so I went back in to open up the embassy with a small team from Washington who were really not part of our original embassy team.

Q: What was the time interval between?

MCWILLIAMS: It was about five months, five months.

Q: Five months.



MCWILLIAMS: But what I discovered when I went back in, it was a weird situation, I was again chief of mission nominally, but the admin security person who had sort of accompanied me back in with a very small team I discovered was quietly sending messages back to Washington saying oh, it's not really safe here, we shouldn't be here and so on without any knowledge on my part and that caused a bit of a problem again. But in any event the decision was made that the ambassador and the rest of the team should come back in, it was the right decision, we never had to evacuate after that.

Q: Well then, in leaving there, you say, we talked about you didn't get a mission and they sent you as diplomat in residence?

MCWILLIAMS: Right. I didn't get what I thought might be coming, that was the ambassadorship in Turkmenistan and again, late in the season without a job lined up and as a senior officer they had a critical need for a diplomat in residence. I resisted that because I wanted another assignment, I wanted it overseas if possible, I certainly didn't want to be farmed out, as I saw it at that point, to a university. But in retrospect I'm very glad that that option came up. I had a great time for a year in New Mexico.

Q: You were there from when to when?

MCWILLIAMS: From the fall semester of '94 through the spring semester of '95.

Q: Now this was the University of New Mexico?

MCWILLIAMS: Right. In Albuquerque.

Q: In Albuquerque. Let's talk about it. I mean, what- how did you find the university and how did you find you fit in?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, I had had a little experience with New Mexico years ago. In my army experience I had spent some time in New Mexico, sort of weekends and so on so I liked the countryside and liked the people very much. I found a very welcoming environment. I worked as part of the international relations, student relations office. That is to say an office that sent students overseas and basically was in charge of those students who were coming in from abroad. Very nice team, I'm still very close to the people that I was with as a matter of fact. But they're very gracious, got me introduced around and so on and enabled me to, on fairly short notice because I really arrived in the middle of the fall semester, to set up a course for the second semester whereby I would teach. I had the option of writing or teaching and I found subsequently that most of my people and most of the people in that circumstance tend to do research and so on but I wanted to teach, I wanted interaction with the students to see what it was like. Plus of course I had the responsibility as all diplomats in residence do of trying to recruit people for the Foreign Service, particularly, and one of the reasons I was station in New Mexico was because we were trying to get minorities into the Foreign Service, a continuing problem for us. I don't frankly feel I was terribly successful at that. I visited campuses in New Mexico, even into Arizona trying to recruit or develop interest and so on; I don't really think I had much impact but I made an effort at it. But the teaching assignment went very well, I enjoyed that.

Q: Let's first talk about the faculty. How did you find you fit in with the faculty? Somebody who's just come out of the hothouse of dealing with a newly emerging country and all that and then your other experiences and then you have people who have been contemplating whatever they contemplate, particularly on the political science side and all by this time had tended to get more esoteric or something, at least in many places. How'd you find you fit in there?

MCWILLIAMS: Very good, very, very- Again, thanks I think in part to the team that sort of was my host there, they got me introduced very quickly to the political science office, the histories offices and so. They had a rather good Russian program including Russian language there and my long experience in the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet Union obviously made them, was a point of interest. So we had discussions and parties and various confabs that were put together based on my experience and so on, talking to students. It was a very full experience and I enjoyed it very much.

Q: What were you teaching?



MCWILLIAMS: I developed a course of, and they agreed to let me teach it, Central Asian history, essentially looking at an area that had no coverage, certainly not at that university. It was an undergrad course although I had juniors and seniors for the most part in the course. And I think it went quite well. The students evaluated me very highly at the end; they evaluated all of their professors. And I had a good relationship with the students and I think we carried it forward quite well, essentially reviewing ancient history but then bringing it very quickly to the modern era and the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Q: How'd you find the students?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think very interested in this particularly subject although it was obviously fairly arcane for most of them. I think what was different for me, I hadn't had a college experience since the late '60s and I think I anticipated that there would be more interest in progressive politics and issues of war and peace, although of course this was prior to our involvement in Iraq. But I guess I found the campus in general as rather apolitical, surprisingly, not particularly focused on issues that I would have expected them to be focused on, political issues. But again, that may have been the campus but that was a little bit disappointing and discouraging to me because I always appreciated, certainly from my experience years ago of the interchange with students of different points of view, but it was a sophisticated community to a significant extent but I missed the radical political element I think would have made it much more interesting.

Q: Well I was wondering what was, I mean you're thinking the University of New Mexico and you think one, they have a Hispanic community and a Native American community. Did they seem to be involved in international affairs or were they off to one side?

MCWILLIAMS: No. That was the frustrating part because as I said earlier, one of my responsibilities was try to develop interest in Foreign Service among minority populations, especially the Native American but also Hispanic and I didn't have much luck in that. I specifically met with some job fairs, I singled out Native Americans and so on, trying to explain what the Foreign Service was all about but I think I found for the most part, particularly with Native Americans and to a large extent with Hispanics, they were much more concerned with their own communities and just getting on with their lives. There was not that focus on international affairs. Although I should say that among some of the Hispanic students certainly I did have good dialogs.

Q: Did you find in the classroom, was the student body relatively passive or a lot of questions?



MCWILLIAMS: I thought it was quite active. It was, the way I tried to run it, initially I tried to prepare lectures that would run for 50 minutes to an hour and I found that very daunting. So what I would do would be to sort of lecture for maybe 20-30 minutes and then just open it up to questions, only insisting that it sort of be relevant to the topic of the day and then promoting questions. And I found that sort of Socratic method made the time go by very quickly and wound up with often conversations that would be extending off over coffee someplace else in the university, which was, as I say a very nice experience.

Q: Well then '95, whither, what?

MCWILLIAMS: '95, I should mention one other thing, that gave me sort of a platform to do some humanitarian work. Because of the continuing civil war in Tajikistan many of our former employees at the embassy, especially for example Jews and Russians and Ukrainians, Germans and so on, were seeking a way out and I worked with my previous ambassador to there to get, I think six people from our staff into the United States as asylees or through various mechanisms. So that was also fun. Indeed one of them came out to the university in New Mexico which was great.

Anyway, in '95, shopping around for assignments but in the cycle this time so I didn't have to sort of scramble. There were a number of opportunities out there and the one I choose was going back to Southeast Asia where I'd really started and this was as pol cons in a rather big embassy in Jakarta.

Q: So you took Indonesia?

MCWILLIAMS: Right, Bahasa for six months I guess it was, six-seven months. And I've got to say I focused on the language to some extent, I didn't do terribly well with it but what I failed to do was really to, I think responsibly approach the problems of, the political problem that were emerging. Because I went out there not as well prepared as I should have been and I fault myself, not FSI for that. At that time I was helping to integrate some of these people from Tajikistan into American society, I was tied up with that. I was also writing memos and dissents about our policy in Afghanistan and things of that sort and I didn't focus sufficiently, I think, in preparation for that assignment in Jakarta. I regret that but it emerged as probably the best assignment in my career.

Q: You mentioned a sense of problems with our policy in Afghanistan. What struck you that was wrong?



MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think shortly after I left Islamabad and even while I was there the U.S. essentially pulled away from interest in Afghanistan. Basically we threw up our hands and walked away, leaving policy control such as it was to our former partners the ISI in Pakistan. And as a consequence we saw a decade of turmoil in Afghanistan. I had been trying to address that problem as I saw it even when I was in Tajikistan writing some reporting cables but also some policy dissent type things referring to our policy in Afghanistan, essentially trying to argue that we should be engaged in what was going on in Afghanistan. But there was throughout the Clinton administration I think a genuine lack of interest in what was going on there.

Q: When you- did you get with your Soviet experience and all, did, I mean while you were here in Washington did the Balkans engage you at all?

MCWILLIAMS: Not really. Obviously, you know, I took a passing interest in it but I, and although I had a number of friends who were dealing involved in the Balkans I never really addressed the issues.

Q: How about taking Indonesia. Did you get any feel for the multitude of peoples in that area?

MCWILLIAMS: Not sufficiently. Not sufficiently. And this is just part of where I feel that as a student I failed. FSI I think does a very good job generally and I think particularly with the Indonesian preparation a good, sophisticated program but I didn't do enough work before I went out to Indonesia. And as a result as political consular I went out there with less knowledge than I should have had. Again, my fault.

Q: Well did you find you were joining a club, the Indonesian club? You know, there's the Soviet, I guess now Russian club, there's the China club, etcetera, etcetera.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes, very much. Yes, there's very much, there was very much an Indonesian club and I unfortunately, I shouldn't say unfortunately, I wound up having a lot of problems with the perspective that they offered for our policy out there. It was an interesting situation. I walked into a political section which turned over completely, there's no one left, a brand new team which was initially a little bit hobbling because we had to sort of begin to make the contacts all over again. But it was a stellar team, just a hell of a good bunch of people. And ironically I had been in, of course, in Bahasa preparation with most of them because we, so we had a good knowledge of each other. But I would say that my team probably, because they were better students were first of all better with the Bahasa and also I think better in terms of understanding what was going on in Indonesia. But fortunately I think it gave us a chance to take a new look.



I remember when I went out there the ambassador's first advice to me-

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MCWILLIAMS: Ambassador Stapleton Roy out of China experience. And he'd been there I guess four months or so before we arrived so he also was new. But I remember him telling me, sitting down with me and saying what I want from this team is production. I want a report from every single officer at least once a week. And I sort of scowled, I said well yes. Because I always was a great reporter in terms of volume at least and my team, it turned out, was very much the same. So I always found it ironic because less than a year later for various reasons which I'll get into he was arguing that we needed to slow down our production. Because the team before had been very circumspect in their reporting and I don't mean to fault them in terms of the notion that they might have been lazy because I don't think they were, they made great contacts and so on. But I think it was an embassy that sought very much to control what Washington knew and understood about a very, very complicated situation in Indonesia.

If I could just as background, we had been, U.S. government had been very close to Suharto since the coup back in 1965 and he had been a very close ally in the war against the Soviets, the Cold War and so on. But what I found was it was as if our policy were on autopilot. When I arrived it was as if the Soviet Union were still out there, we were still basically in need of a dictator who was in fact for many reasons not a good ally for U.S. policy in the region or certainly in Indonesia. But what I began to do or what my team I should say began to do was report reality, to report elements about human rights abuse by the Indonesia military which was rampant, the corruption in the system, lack of democracy, repression of human rights activists and democratic activists and so on. The embassy was not welcoming to this kind of reporting because for years it had been essentially a defender, an advocate for the regime against both journalistic criticism but also congressional criticism that was prompted especially by the Indonesian military's human rights abuse. So we basically began producing reports that were sympathetic to the perspective that this was a dictatorship, that we ought to be concerned about the human rights abuses out there and so on. And we wound up in pretty stiff competition for the picture of Indonesia, what we were trying to portray. The ambassador, because he was new, was sort of Solomon-like. He was prepared to accept whatever perspective seemed to be initially to him correct but the military attaché's office which is very active and very close to the Indonesian military and the DCM and some other elements in the leadership of the embassy who were part of the old Indonesia network were very reluctant to see our reporting go out. I can recall when we sought to write the human rights report in the fall for Indonesia my embassy, my section, had pretty much come to the conclusion we had to have a new human rights perspective and we fought very hard for a hard, honest perspective and were pleased to find Washington receptive to this message because I think just in the three or four months of our reporting we had begun to indicate there were some problems that had gone unaddressed previously. And again, butting heads largely with the defense attaché's office and the old DCM.



Q: How about the CIA?

MCWILLIAMS: CIA out there, strangely, did take a very assertive role on domestic issues like that. I guess I can say this, in those days the diplomat community was very broad in Jakarta. You had North Koreans there, you had Palestinians there, Libyans were there, Iraqis were there, of course Iranians, and I believe that the CIA's focus was much more in monitoring and having contact, if you know what I mean, with some of those elements. So they did not play a policy role to any great extent in terms of what we were doing. They obviously acquiesced to what had been the think at the embassy, basically to support the Suharto regime.

Q: Well, can you talk- first place, could you talk about the regime, who was in charge, who was doing what?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well Suharto had taken over in a strange coup environment back in 1965. There is still historical debate as to who initiated the coup and how it was that Suharto became the great victor in this coup scenario but there's no question about the fact that it was an extremely bloody affair where over half-a-million people probably died in this coup attempt, principally victims of the military and some Islamic militias that they had formed. And we proceeded to work very close with Suharto in two senses. Certainly we helped his military, had a very close relationship with his military through the years but also we saw this as a great platform for development by U.S. companies. Big U.S. companies went in, extractive industries principally, oil and gas but also of gold and copper and so on. So it was a very friendly environment for the major corporations, it was a very close military-to-military relationship. Things began to become difficult only in 1991 when there was a massacre in East Timor involving the Indonesian military where they killed well over 270 peaceful students. And it turned out that a couple of American journalists were actually there and there was a German who was filming this. And it became kind of a cause celebre back here and finally I think what had been a longstanding concern about human rights generally in Indonesia came to a head and restrictions were put upon our ability to work with the Indonesian military. And this came in 1992. And really from 1992 until just a few months ago, in late 2005, there have been restrictions on our cooperation which I very much supported.



But this takes us to say, late '96, I'd been there about six months and the embassy wrote a message arguing very strongly for a reinstitution of the military-to-military relationship, specifically with the IMET program, International Military Education and Training program for the Indonesian military. And I felt this was wrong, I felt that we hadn't seen any real reform and I wrote a dissent on that and it was initially, I thought, well received by the ambassador, not by his DCM but the message went out as a dissent. It was a Friday night I recall and I thought well this was pretty good, the ambassador was true to his word, that he would allow dissenting perspectives to go out as he had allowed a lot of our reporting to go out that was essentially setting a new picture for Indonesia. But at the end of the day I got word from his secretary that he wanted me and my team to stay in the office past closing time. And he came down and pulled us all into my deputy's room and began a ranting lecture saying that he was very dissatisfied with the political section, that it wasn't reporting what he felt needed to be reported and so on and so on, loud and intimidating. And he was very clear this was a consequence of my dissent earlier in the day. So we listened to this for three or four minutes of this I said Mr. Roy, I think you don't want to talk to my team, you want to talk to me. So let's go over to my office and talk this out. And he sort of said well okay. And as I went out I remember I slammed the door and then slammed my own door behind him and essentially lectured him and said this isn't right, this is not right. This is, first of all, this is not the way you respond to dissent and number two, you don't intimidate my team which has done a great job, you talk to me, you deal with me. And that, I think established a good relationship because we became well, I took evermore a dissenting perspective there on lots of issues but I think there was sort of a baseline respect between the two of us from that moment forward.

I might say my team, after he left our suite, was very shook up and I remember one of the members of my team saying, you know, in the future if I ever want to dissent I should talk it out with the team and I think I took the position essentially that, you know, they or I could and should dissent when we felt it was necessary because they agreed with my perspective on this but they hadn't anticipated the consequences. But it was just one of a series, I think I've had four or five major dissents in my career and each one has been problematic but I think that was the most confrontational that I encountered.

Q: Well did you find, I mean when you look at this, I mean we're talking about aging regimes and all you do is look across, you know, look over to your right or whatever, look to your east and see the Philippines where you had a parallel. I mean, I understand Mrs. Suharto was Mrs. Five Percent or something.

MCWILLIAMS: Ten percent.

Q: Excuse me, ten percent.



MCWILLIAMS: Ibu Tien.

Q: I mean, corrupt as all hell. I don't know as she went for shoes the way Imelda Marcos did.

MCWILLIAMS: No, that wasn't the problem.

Q: But the point being that here were regimes that started out rather promising and over periods of time just got worse and-

MCWILLIAMS: I guess-

Q: Maybe it isn't promising.

MCWILLIAMS: I think frankly when you consider the regime, the Suharto regime, began with a bloodbath, which we overlooked essentially, and of course this was the Cold War period, we were just getting involved in Vietnam and so on, but I'm not sure that the Suharto regime was ever a good regime. It was good in the sense that it made space for our firms and it worked with us in an anti-communist way. When it invaded East Timor it was done in the context of overthrowing an incipient leftist regime in East Timor and so on. But I'm not sure it was ever a good regime. You've made reference to Ibu Tien, Suharto's wife. I just wrote a review of a book about the presidency in Indonesia and I make the argument, and it's not my own it's one that I picked up from Indonesians that Ibu Tien, who died in 1996 or late '95 really was the one who held the regime together because what happened after her death was that the children of Suharto and Ibu Tien became rampantly corrupt, blatantly corrupt. They'd always been corrupt but she'd always sort of held it in, to some extent held the reins so that they wouldn't compete with one another, that it wouldn't be too blatant, that it wouldn't be scandalous. She kept sort of a bit of a hold on them. When she disappeared Suharto was not able to restrain his own kids and they became blatantly corrupt, competing with one another in various sectors and I think first of all it was known among the local population but it became ever more an irritant. But what Suharto had relied on all those years was an elite within Jakarta, business elite essentially, that he had basically promoted and helped and so on but I think even they became scandalized at what the family was doing. So I think in the very brief period from her death in late '95, early '96 until his fall in '98 the corruption became a very critical problem. Of course there was also the financial crash in '97 to which he did not respond well, nor did we I might add. And so I think the combination of definite economic downturn for Indonesia plus the scandal-ridden regime that he was operating, that prompted his removal. But again Ibu Tien I think was sort of a critical player. Had she lingered on she might have been in a position to keep some of the scandals off the front page that was essentially prompted by her family.



Q: Well let's take a look at our attitude. By '90- you got there in '90-

MCWILLIAMS: Six.

Q: Six. So we're talking about the Cold War was definitely over.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes. Totally over.

Q: And we were making nice to Vietnam at that time or at least-

MCWILLIAMS: Clinton clearly was trying to restore a relationship.

Q: Yes. And so there weren't external pressures and also terrorism was not-

MCWILLIAMS: Terrorism was not an issue.

Q: -was not an issue so what was there- you see what I'm getting at.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, you know, I think, as I said earlier, to some extent it was autopilot. I think that the old Indonesia clique in the State Department and to some extent in the Pentagon genuinely liked working with the Suharto regime, they knew how to deal with these people. As corrupt as they were it was an old relationship, often personal relationships, that things just kind of kept going on autopilot. In addition there was a think called the U.S. Indonesia Society, still is, in Washington, heavily financed by corporations who are invested in Indonesia. They acted as an ally to the old Indonesia network in the State Department and the Pentagon to sort of keep things as they are. It was a comfortable relationship for them. I think they didn't take into full account and what we were trying to do with our reporting was to reveal the incredible discrepancy between the wealthy and the poor in Indonesia, the abysmal record of the military which was truly a human rights abuser of enormous proportions like in East Timor and so on. I think it was, as I say, autopilot but also, and this I think was an addition from Ambassador Roy drawing from his China experience, he saw Indonesia, as did I think some people in Washington, as a potential ally in a possible confrontation with China. A rising China might constitute a genuine threat to the region and we're looking for allies particularly an Asian and Indonesia was a logical counterbalance, counterweight to Chinese influence in Southeast Asia particularly given the fact that Indonesians were basically not very fond of the Chinese even on an ethnic level.



Q: Yes well, I mean, of course, you know, they had these riots again and again.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: I mean, as in the Philippines.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Which were basically anti-Chinese.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, when we speak about that massacre in 1965-67 at the time of the coup most of the victims were Chinese.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Anyhow.

Q: Well let's talk a bit about your relations with the attaché's or lack thereof. How did this work?

MCWILLIAMS: Pretty confrontational. They had an agenda and very specifically it was to promote relations with Aubry, which is the military then, since to be known as the TNI. They would defend its reputation against our claims of human rights abuse. It was a constant challenging of our reporting versus their reporting. I can remember in the beginning, as I say in '96 we sought to change the tenor and tone of the human rights report, the annual human rights report, and we're dealing with Papua, West Papua or then called Irian Jaya. And I recall we had reporting of tremendous human rights abuse by the military from the ICRC and from local NGOs and church people out there, and they would produce reporting from their sources which were the military saying oh but the military is not doing these things. And they would approach, I can recall debating in front of the ambassador, well we have this report from the ICRC and they'll say well we've got a report from Aubry saying it's not doing these things so it's he said, she said, you know, you can't really draw a conclusion so we can't do anything in the way of reporting. That basically didn't fly with the ambassador who I think, as I say, in that first year was pretty honest in terms of reporting the facts as they came to his desk. I think that that began to change over time.

Q: What happened?



MCWILLIAMS: I think he and the embassy reverted to type, which is to say began to support the Suharto regime more and more against our criticism but then, of course, in the fall of '97 we had the economic crash and the embassy itself, I think, was forced to take a new position because it was clear the Suharto regime was in deep trouble. It was not coming out of this financial crunch very well, it was going to be in need of outside assistance and the embassy sought to put conditions on IMF (International Monetary Fund) and World Bank assistance as did the IMF and World Bank, in early- late '97, early '98 as they sought to develop a solution for Jakarta. Again, there was some contention over that because they were putting economic, financial conditionality on any money that would go to Suharto's regime that would salvage him, basically, constraints which were part of the Washington consensus, which is to say not particularly friendly to the lower classes but essentially to the institutions, they had to salvage those institutions. We were making the argument at the time that there ought to be also political pressure upon the regime to make reforms in the political area, in human rights area, that this should be part of the package. We didn't get very far with that. But in a sense our policy almost became irrelevant as the situation in Indonesia simply developed much faster than any of us had expected. You began to have massive demonstrations, particularly by students, against the regime. The regime responded with great force, shooting down students and so on. It was a particularly interesting period, this is the first six months of '98 or going to May of '98. I had, as I said before, a really, really good team. We were out on the streets daily, we were in the demonstrations reporting using cell phones and so on to report back not only to the embassy but at night sometimes back to Washington via cell phone exactly what was happening in the streets.

Q: There's something with the new-

MCWILLIAMS: It was astounding to me. You know, I had been in places where you didn't have a telephone to Washington. But here literally you'd be in the streets and of course you always wait until the shooting started or the pepper gas or the tear gas began to spray and people started to scream, then you make your phone call because you've got great background noise. I did this repeatedly. But- and I hate to say it but we had, of course, some problems, as we had throughout my three years there, in getting some of the reporting out. There'd be restrictions, oh you can't say that, we're not sure of that and so on, anything that was too negative about the regime. But with those phone calls I was able to report to the watch office back at State exactly what was happening with essentially no controls. And I was never criticized for that because it was ongoing and had to be covered well past the time the embassy had closed and so on. So I think, very frankly, we were able to give Washington a moment-by-moment description of what was happening in the streets in Jakarta, for example, that was very useful for them.



I recall one instance where just before the big riots in Jakarta, the night before, they had, the police as it turned out, had shot down, killed four students and I reported this, again from the scene on my cell phone. And I got a call back saying Mrs. Albright is not sure that those four people are really dead, there's some question about that. She wants to know if you've seen the bodies. So I went to the morgue at the university where the kids had been laid out and went into the room where the kids were and gave a report back, I'm now standing in front of the four bodies, yes they're dead. But I mean, again it was the immediacy that little cell phone gave you that really made it very, very powerful.

Q: Was there any call within the State Department or the embassy or something, getting a little bit concerned about the cell phone business?

MCWILLIAMS: No. Oddly enough no. Very strange, I always wondered why they didn't figure that out because again, of course I was honest, I was telling them what was going on in the street and they wanted to know because this of course, there were thousands of American citizens in Indonesia so I mean, there was great concern about day-by-day, minute-by-minute almost coverage of these events. But no, I never ran into problems with that. I think in fact they welcomed that.

Q: Alright, before this all happened when you got there, how did, where were your contacts? How did the political section work?

MCWILLIAMS: I think, what I found when I got out there, most of the contacts were essentially the old elite in Jakarta I referred to earlier, I recall being graciously invited by the DCM to several dinners and so on where she sought to share her contacts with this incoming political consular. They were all elderly, for the most part, all of a fixed view, mostly ex-military and it became very clear that this was one element of the society but it wasn't the whole game. What we began early on was a program whereby each of my officers had a specific area of Indonesia to be responsible for covering so that we're not Jakarta focused as I felt the reporting had been. I had somebody assigned to Kalimantan, somebody assigned to Aceh. And I said now you got to get out there, you got to get in the local people and report what's going on outside of Jakarta. So that was one contact development scheme we had.



But beyond that, and I've not always been a great friend of AID but I think USAID, through the middle '90s in Jakarta had done a wonderful job in sponsoring the development of small NGOs, local NGOs, that were local in environmental issues, human rights issues, in democracy promotion; these NGOs were often under threat from the Suharto regime, of course, from the military but because of their connection to USAID they were somewhat protected. And again, I'm very grateful that USAID made available to us a lot of these little NGOs, introduced us to these people and as a consequence we had much more of a people's perspective on what was happening around us than I think the previous generation of reporters had. So again, very grateful to USAID, which not only developed this NGO network and protected it to a very real extent but also shared that with us so that we could get some good reporting out. And I might say although we had lots of contention within the embassy, much like my experience in Islamabad, I found that we had friends within a very large mission who wanted us to know things that basically had not been previously reported.

I recall shortly after I arrived a newly arriving agriculture, somebody from the Department of Agriculture, had just been sent out and I heard it discussed at a team meeting saying well, he was a tree hugger so he had a two-month assignment. Well, I came to know that there were lots of tree huggers, lots of people concerned about the environment out in mission, they simply couldn't report what they were seeing. So we tapped into some of that for our reporting.

Q: Yes, because trees became quite an issue there about- over logging to put it mildly.

MCWILLIAMS: Well that, I mean, the thing about Indonesia was that it, for example, particularly in the New Guinea area, this is Papua, New Guinea, it was the second largest tropical rain forest in the world after the Amazon and it was being assaulted, as you suggest, mercilessly by illegal logging often run by the military. But I, for the hell of it, did a little search on embassy reporting to see what number of environment reports had been sent out of the economic section which had responsibility in those days for environmental reporting and as I recall the tag was "senv," s-e-n-v. So I typed in senv to see what was being reported and there's nothing reported with that tagline, which is to say there'd been no environmental reporting. So we sort of took that over, claiming it sort of as a human rights issue and began doing some of that ourselves.



...in Indonesia. There was a transition to actually the, a woman took over who was the wife of my deputy and she was very bright and although I think still prepared to sort of parrot the old line was more open to, I think, the points we were making as were some members of her team. So there was some cooperation on that. I recall I did a series of reporting, messages that sought to develop the theme of gaps, gaps in health care, gaps in access to education between the rich and the poor, trying to illustrate the fact that there were real social tensions out there based on access to services and so on. And it was really a difficult series of five reports, five different sectors I addressed but it had to be worked out with the economic section, each one of them, and it was bruising but ultimately I think the messages that went out were consensus messages were pretty good and frankly better by virtue of the fact that I had been very carefully pressed by the economic section to get it right and not simply to go off with some of my political thinking.

Q: Who was the DCM?

MCWILLIAMS: Initially it was a woman named Barbara Harvey, very much from the old school and then subsequently Mike Owens.

Q: How'd you find the response from the desk, the bureau?

MCWILLIAMS: Pretty good actually. There was, I think we had a particularly good desk officer whose name is going to elude me, Bob Clark, Bob Clark, who was a valiant guy, a very honest guy, one of the best officers I've known in the Service, who quietly helped us to make sure that the perspective got through. And the assistant secretary, Stanley Roth, was a very intelligent fellow and I think was also very open to new analysis. So they were quietly allies for us back there. I might say also in INR I think there were a lot of people who had been longing for sort of a broader perspective and they were quite welcoming of our reporting.

Q: What was military coming from? How did they recruit and what was, how did you see them?

MCWILLIAMS: Now this is the Indonesian military?

Q: Yes.



MCWILLIAMS: It was, the Indonesian military has a very special role in Indonesia based upon the fact that in 1945, '46, '47 the military really took the lead in freeing themselves from the Indonesians, that the political leadership was seen to be somewhat compromising. And as a consequence the military, the first generation felt and probably deservedly so that they had a great deal to do with the winning of independence. But they overplayed their hand and I think after the coup, Suharto's coup in '65, that military was his military, it was corrupt and it remained so actually. I mean, there's much can be said about that today.

Q: What- can you talk about during your time, East Timor?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I think probably, at least in the early stages, the first year or two, that was the principle bone of contention between myself, my section I should say, and the military in the embassy. Because it was a horrific story, tremendous abuses going on out there. And for many years there had been I think growing concern in Congress, certainly in the press about what the Indonesians were doing to East Timor and the embassy for many years had acted as a defender, an advocate for the regime, trying to basically defeat these arguments that in fact Indonesia was guilty of human rights abuse on a grand scale in East Timor. Our reporting, and I had a particularly good officer, Gary Gray, who was out there, spoke Portuguese which helped a lot, as well as great Bahasa, and his reporting was particularly well done and I think established a baseline of much better understanding what was going on in Indonesia for Washington. There was in the summer of '97, excuse me, summer of '98 an opportunity to write another dissent in which I proposed that we begin thinking about advocating a referendum in East Timor. Not well received at the embassy, not well in Washington. I had a conversation subsequently with the assistant secretary in the fall of '98 in which he said look, I agree with what you've said, I've agreed you know, morally, historically you're right, but I just don't believe East Timor is economically viable and therefore I think an argument for a referendum which might lead to independence is just not going to work. And I undertook to write for him a long message which looked at the economic question, viability of East Timor, anticipating oil and gas revenues and so on. Oddly enough I published this, I sent out this very long report, 20-some pages on the very day that, in January that President Habibie announced that he was going to allow a referendum in East Timor. And I know there was great thinking in the embassy and I understand subsequently in Washington that somehow I had advance word of that; it was just a coincidence. But it was from that point forward, January, that we began to look to a referendum that would be monitored by the United Nations in East Timor which along with the fall of Suharto was one of the two great events of those three years that I had there.

Q: Keep with the Timor thing, I want to come back to the political thing.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.



Q: What about the Australians and this because they played quite a role? I mean, they, I mean it was a border town, a border city, a border country.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Australia had been, even more than I think we had been, a supporter of the Jakarta policy in East Timor. They had made a deal in the '70s whereby they drew a line between their oil and Indonesia's oil which was quite beneficial to them but the quid pro quo for that was essentially a policy that would support Suharto's occupation of East Timor. So they were not friends of East Timor but essentially Habibie, who was not highly regarded by anybody, changed the game because here was Indonesia finally saying well, let's have a referendum. So you had U.S. policy and Australian policy which had long essentially acquiesced in Suharto's occupation of East Timor now looking at a very new situation in which a referendum was coming.

I think the critical issue as it emerged up until that referendum was actually held in September of '99 was how we would deal with the growing military repression in East Timor in advance of the referendum, the intimidation, the killing and so on. Again, I had a reporter, Gary Gray out there much of the time who did a wonderful job talking about what was in fact growing militia attacks against civilians, militias obviously organized by the military against civilians. I went out there quite frequently also to support his reporting but unfortunately what we needed to that point was a strong U.S. position essentially telling the military to knock it off, that we were aware that they were setting up these militias basically as cat's paw to intimidate the local population into voting the way Jakarta wanting them to vote and so on, and we had massacres of over 50 people in this period, a very, very rough situation. But unfortunately the U.S. never actually took a hard line with the Indonesian military about stopping these militias which were conducting these killings. Our arguments was, in the political section, you've got to disband these militias and get rid of them whereas the embassy took the line favored by the DAT's office, the defense attaché's office that well, we just have to counsel with these people and you know, encourage Aubry, TNI as it became to be more responsible here and get the facts and so on. And as a consequence the United States didn't take an opportunity to require the military to reign in these militias in advance of what happened in September which was a mass killing of East Timoris as a consequence of their vote for independence.

Q: How did you find in East Timor and also in West Irian, the role of the NGOs, various UN and all of that? I mean, were these kind of essential elements in monitoring this vast island empire?



MCWILLIAMS: Very much so. Again, because we were so limited in terms of what we could do on the ground, especially in Papua, because getting there was 13 hour flight and frankly was very expensive and there were limitations on how often I could go out there. I had given myself responsibility for West Papua on the team so as a consequence we relied very much on local NGOs. The Indonesians had pretty much prevented international NGOs from operating in places like Aceh or East Timor or West Papua. As a consequence we relied very much on local organizations which were often harassed and the ICRC which in East Timor played a very important role.

Q: Why would they be an International Red Cross?

MCWILLIAMS: The International Committee of the Red Cross, they had a very shaky position in East Timor essentially at international community insistence, basically hanging on by their fingertips but they did a good job there. They were, and of course we would rely on contacts with journalists. There was a particularly good- as things began to fall apart in Indonesia you had more and more international journalists based in Jakarta and we had a very good relationship with them in the political section and fed off each other very much, frankly, for what was going on. So we were able to use NGOs and journalists and I might say also local clergy very extensively. In East Timor, of course, you had Bishop Bello and the Church, which we were tightly tied in with. In West Papua it's essentially Animus Christian and both the Catholic and the Protestant churches there were very active on the human rights side and we had very beneficial contacts with people who had credible reporting. You know, it's funny when you're reporting from an outpost like that if you can quote a doctor or a church person, any kind of religious clergy, somehow that gives you some authenticity. So we would seek out medical people or religious people for interviews.

Q: What about Aceh?

MCWILLIAMS: Aceh again, I had one officer assigned, actually two officers, there was a split, one went home and one stayed, working in Aceh and again, it was a very difficult area for us because there was a burgeoning, well an ongoing conflict there but I think from our perspective East Timor had the higher draw on our reporting assets.

Q: What about Islam at that time? It was an Islamic state but I mean, how did this play from your perspective?



MCWILLIAMS: Islamic, in Indonesia Islam is not the aggressive political force, at least it wasn't then, that it has been and continues to be in much of the rest of the world. I think that's changing now. But for the most part it was a syncretic approach to religion and we were not dealing with fanatical Islam to any great extent. Just at the end of my tour that began to be apparent as the military began to develop some militias, as I've said like in East Timor and other places, which were specifically Islamic fundamentalist. In one instance particularly in a place called the Maluku Islands just as I was leaving the military sponsored the movement of several thousand Islamic militants to this largely Christian island enclave. As a consequence we had communal fighting there for several years which has led to the deaths of thousands of people. That was an example of the Indonesian military specifically lined to Islamic fundamentalism. But since my departure, of course, you've had a growth in Islam and political Islam in Indonesia. It was interesting, one of the young people on my, a very young person on my team, a woman took an interest in this and began exploring the pesantren, which is to say sort of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia, actually visiting them, interestingly, as a woman and frankly as a Jewish woman. I always thought rather innovative and brave on her part but she did some very good groundbreaking, I think, really reporting on what was becoming then a more political approach to Islamic teaching in these essentially grade and middle level school scenarios. At the time we didn't recognize it well enough but I think we did a little reporting on it. Because of the financial crash the education system was very, very much weakened. Although nominally free people had to pay for their kids to be educated, to bribe teachers, to buy books, to buy uniforms and so on, it wasn't free as the Suharto regime contended. And the real crash for the economy meant that a lot of parents couldn't really fund the education of the children. So what happened was a lot of money came from the Middle East to establish these Islamic schools, these pesantren, and many of them were quite radical.

Q: Was this sort of a replica of the madrasa?

MCWILLIAMS: It's sort of like, yes.

Q: You know, the Saudis apparently had a lot of-



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Madrassa generally is thought to be sort of upper level education, virtually colleges whereas the pesantren would take you from the age of six. It's more primary school and middle school. Now some madrassa would actually have also very early education but for the most part when I speak of pesantren I'm talking about primary school, middle school. And that's where the money came in to essentially fund the set up of small schools, often in urban areas, usually led by fairly radical Islamic teachers, not particularly well-schooled teachers. But as a consequence you had a generation of Indonesians that were moving through these rather radical schools in much greater numbers than previously, I think to some extent as we look at the increasing Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia this was a source for some of that.

Q: Well were we able, you mentioned the young lady, Foreign Service officer who went, were we able to monitor this? Because my understanding is often a movement like this can sort of pass by-

MCWILLIAMS: No.

Q: -the knowledge of an embassy or a political section.

MCWILLIAMS: I think to a significant extent it did pass us by except for her reporting. Because she would actually sit down with students and talk with them-she had good Bahasa-and with the teachers and so on. And she picked up the fact that we were seeing this movement. And I, I forget whether it was her reporting or some of the reporting I had done, talking to scholars and so on because we had good contact with a number of religious teachers there including a former- the future president who had some of these concerns about radicalism sort of beginning to take shape in Indonesian Islamic society.

Q: Who's the name of this officer?

MCWILLIAMS: Shawn Dorman. She's retired. She retired early. She's now working as the deputy editor of the AFSA magazine, Foreign Service Journal. Oddly enough, all of my team members now, well now, four of the five of them, three of the five of them have retired early and I think it's particularly sad because every single one of them were superb.



It was interesting, just to give you one example of how things work in the Foreign Service, I guess. One of my officers, the one who had covered East Timor, at great personal risk because it was a very, very dicey situation out there, I had nominated for the political reporter of the year award and he got it. He was notified he'd won and he was invited back to Washington to accept the award, he notified his parents and so on and then four or five days later a message came out saying no, we've made a mistake, you didn't win. And I forget now what the screw up was but it was a political decision in Washington, not related to this particular individual or even his set of reporting but he had already of course informed his family he was coming back to accept this great award and that's how things work sometimes in the Foreign Service. We were aghast and we wrote petitions back saying this is absurd, make it a dual award, he deserves this. But anyway, he has since left the Foreign Service. And a stellar fellow who worked for me on politics in Indonesia has left the Foreign Service and Shawn has left the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, I mean, did you feel was this sort of dissatisfaction with the Foreign Service or was it just that-

MCWILLIAMS: Oh, on their part again, you'd have to talk with them but yes, I think to some extent. My own sense is again, both based on my own experience, I left in 2001, but in close talking with a lot of good friends, the Foreign Service is a different institution than what I think it was when I went in certainly.

Q: In what way?

MCWILLIAMS: I think it's very much an old bureaucracy, essentially it's very careerist. I think there is very little room for dissent now and I think people are basically punching tickets. I think the people remain very good people but the system, I think, is not serving the American people, serving its mission of keeping Washington policymakers informed.

I mentioned it earlier on in a very simplistic way, I think there's an emphasis on good news and trying to make the situation in the field fit the perspective and the shape of things as they're seen in Washington. I think there's a reluctance to change that, at least that's what I'm told by friends now.

Q: Well, to put this in more specific terms, do you feel this is because of the change in administration? We're now in the fifth or sixth year of the Bush II administration which seems to be far more oriented the way you say.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes, there's very much a perspective that this is politics really drive promotions, particularly at senior level. That policy is set in Washington and you basically, there should not be reporting that challenges that policy in any sense. But I don't think this is only the problem of this administration. Again, my own experience which has been rather bloody in the '90s, well the late '80s, in Islamabad and subsequently in Indonesia, suggests to me that this is a system that, as I say, is not open to dissent, either formal dissent or even reporting that seems to go against the grain. I know I've been in touch with some people who actually monitor dissent in the formal sense and there are very few dissents now that are offered. You know, you think back to Vietnam and the scores of dissents that came from the Foreign Service about- and I mean these were dissents that were career enders in many cases. But the Iraq war, notwithstanding the very broad and I think well founded opposition to that war and to the way it was conducted, has produced nowhere near as many dissents. And I think that, from my perspective reflects on first of all the atmosphere, the environment that doesn't welcome dissent and I think also perhaps a change in the kinds of people who are in. Ever more now I think people don't come into the Foreign Service with the expectation of spending a full career here. They're going to punch a ticket in the sense in their broader careers and of course coming from the Foreign Service is great for lots of careers. But the people like myself and perhaps yourself that envisaged staying for their entire careers, that's rather rare now in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well let's go back to the political situation in Indonesia, I mean, basically the regime. Did you come out, I mean with the, I mean you were the new boy on the block-

MCWILLIAMS: Very much so.

Q: -in Indonesia politics, but you know, all of us look around and you couldn't help but look at the Philippines and some other places and aging dictators go, you know?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: I mean, you know, and usually there's something that follows that's not necessarily a replica of the regime before. Did you sort of come out with the idea well, you know, this guy's probably, Suharto's maybe on his way out or something like that?



MCWILLIAMS: Well again, I sort of described it earlier as events taking control. We were only, by I'd say early '98 monitoring the situation, I had proposed, our section had proposed that we begin to insist on some democratic reform just prior to the end but in point of fact that didn't happen. But I think the people were insisting on democratic reform. And Suharto was out. Not only that but I think for the first time there was really a flowering of criticism of what the old elite had done to Indonesia including the military, obviously very critical of the military and the military was very much on the defensive within Indonesia. I think also by virtue of what it did in East Timor in September, now this is after I left, in September of '99, destroying over 70 percent of the infrastructure of East Timor, killing 1,500 people, killing some foreigners, ex-pats died as well in this, as a consequence of that I think that in Washington there was a willingness and a readiness to basically shut off our cooperation with the Indonesian military. But what I found stunning was, now this is sitting back in Washington in a different job but monitoring the situation in Indonesia very closely, notwithstanding what had happened in September before the end of the year in '99, the Pentagon was again petitioning for reestablishing a relationship with the military. That basically has never not been the mindset in the Pentagon. This is the Clinton white house, of course. But I think essentially those people who had dominated our policy for years and years and years in Washington towards Indonesia essentially retained the same interests. That is to say to maintain as good a relationship as possible with the military and secure the environment for U.S. investment, major U.S. investment. And I think to this day that continues to be the dominating interests of our administration.

Obviously in the post-9/11 world a new element came into that which is to say concern about terrorism. Terrorism has become a growing problem in Indonesia, the Bali bombings twice now and bombings in Jakarta. And the Pentagon and the Bush administration generally have made the argument well, we need to work with the army to crush terrorism. Well, as the problem presents itself in Indonesia terrorism is a police problem, it's small cells, it's not like in the Philippines and the southern Philippines where you have armies roaming and so on where you need military \_\_\_\_\_. This essentially is a police problem and we've worked with the police, I think well, to develop their forensic skills and so on but nonetheless, and it's been defective in Congress to some extent, the Pentagon and the administration have argued that well we have this terrorism problem that means we have to work with the military. And a number of us who are on the NGO side now continue to argue that that really doesn't make sense, it's a police problem and number two we argue as well, that the Indonesian military itself has ties to Islamic fundamentalists which should give us pause.

Q: Talk about you arrived in what, '96?

MCWILLIAMS: '96 in January.

Q: And you were there until when?



MCWILLIAMS: Until July of '99.

Q: Okay. When you arrived can you talk about the political situation, leadership and all and what developed there?

MCWILLIAMS: Okay. When I arrived the Suharto regime was intact, there were no challengers or challenges to its rule, the only question being his health, he was in his middle to late 70s at that point but I think no one anticipated that he would not actually seek a new term, which he did, of office, extending his rule in '98. But I think what essentially changed that scenario, that understanding was the financial crisis in '97 and-

Q: This by the way was a crisis that hit from Japan to Thailand.

MCWILLIAMS: Right. All of Southeast Asia was affected. But I think Indonesia probably crashed lower and took longer to come back. And it was to some extent a house of cards. You know, you'd fly into Jakarta and you'd see a very modern city with skyscrapers and so on but of course as soon as you left Jakarta you would see some real poverty. And even inside the city there was poverty. But it was a house of cards, it collapsed and as a consequence what really turned things for Suharto in '98 was the elite itself recognized that it couldn't continue with Suharto, it had to find a new option and he was gone very quickly. I recall there was a meeting that he had with former Vice President Mondale who had been sent out in early '98 to give him the word that you have to start reforming, you've got to do what the IMF says and what the World Bank says, which by the way turned out to be pretty bad advice, but nothing on the political side as I say, no political reform. But in his meeting with Mondale, Mondale said to him listen, if you do what IMF and World Bank and we are telling you to do, within six months you will have this thing turned around. And Suharto said to Mondale I don't have six months. And that was a lightening bolt for all of us, even those of us who had been his critics. I mean if he now acknowledges that he doesn't have, is that close to the end here. And I think that shook up a lot of policymakers. But that was from him in probably February-March of '98. And he was right, he was gone in May.

Q: Well what was bringing, I mean what were the forces that were bringing this about?

MCWILLIAMS: I think ultimately, ultimately I think the turning point was the elite. Because of the scandals perpetrated by his family, by him himself and the realization that he wasn't going to pull this thing out, the elite itself turned against him. It was his own ministers, his own cabinet, which in the final analysis said no, this isn't going to work and we're resigning, I think that was the final blow to him. And suddenly he was gone.



Q: I mean, did it, were we playing games of if Suharto leaves what happens? I mean, were we-

MCWILLIAMS: Well, there wasn't a lot of that. '98 was a very interesting time. I had this rather strange relationship with my ambassador as I've described before whom I had respect for almost up until the end because for example I had been very close to some of the democrats, particularly Megawati, the daughter of Sukarno, who I saw as genuinely popular. It was clear in the streets that she had support. As I say, my team spent a lot of time in the streets, a lot of time with her at the rallies and so on and I had been preaching that you know, this was a political force that we should consider. She on the other hand within the embassy was a joke, she was not highly regarded, a simple housewife, how can we, you know, take her seriously. And I felt that both she and people around her had political strength that we were not evaluating fairly. And I recall in January of '98 she was having a rally and she told me that this was going to be very important, I'm going to be saying some very important things, I want you there. And then at the last minute she said can you bring your ambassador. And I said oh shit. Because I knew that he wouldn't cross the city to go out to an evening presentation at her house with thousands of her screaming people and so on but I put it to her- to the ambassador. And remember the DCM was there, Beth Jones, and I argued-

Q: Was it Beth Jones?



MCWILLIAMS: I'm trying to remember if it was Mike Owens or Beth Jones. Excuse me, Barbara Harvey. I'm confusing them. I'm pretty sure it was Barbara Harvey at that point. But it was a three-way conversation between the DCM, the ambassador and myself and this was after work and I said I'm heading out there, would you consider going out, she's asked me to ask you? And he was sort of hesitating and I said look. She has not done anything that we consider to be wrong. She's played her hand carefully, she's kept her people out of the violence, there's been no violent demonstrations by her people, we owe her this. And he said well you know, you've got a point. So anyway I went out there not expecting him to come and I recall I was one of maybe five or six diplomats sitting in the front row, there was a Yugoslav ambassador, how he showed up I still don't know. But suddenly midway through the evening events but before she began to speak my ambassador shows up and tremendous attention, the U.S. ambassador has shown up. And so I quickly get up from the front row seat that I had and have him sit down and Megawati catches him from the stage, that he has shown up and she's beaming broadly and she walks across the stage as someone else is making a speech and takes him by the hand and pulls him onto the stage to sit by her. And I recall the glare that I got from the ambassador as he is sort of forced to sit through this. And what the speech was that she gave was the first explicit public denunciation of Suharto, saying he had to go. And it was indeed a fiery, incredible speech. But I figured the next morning I am in shit and this is going to be really, really bad. But the ambassador, and I give him credit for this, he said you know, this is helpful to me. Because when I get criticized back in Washington for not being sensitive to the democrats and what they're trying to do here I can say I went to that speech. And he did use that subsequently I recall many times. So he was an interesting fellow and I don't think he got in trouble from the Suharto administration for having done that. Just an episode.

Q: Yes. Well, how did this play out? I mean, what were we saying? What was going to happen? I mean, Suharto is teetering.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: And what were our concerns?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I think our concerns were sort of fundamental, basic stuff. I mean, we were concerned about the safety of Americans, of course, in an increasingly violent environment. We were concerned that the military not stage a coup. Even though it was Suharto's military there was deep concern and I think frankly came very close that there might be a military coup to install another military leader which would essentially end what we hoped to be a democratic evolution there. But what sort of took things out of our hands was the killings that I referred to earlier of four students at a university in Jakarta on the night of, it was in May, I can't remember the exact date now. But that was sort of-



Q: This is '98?

MCWILLIAMS: This is '98. And we recognized that this is perhaps going to be the spark that sets things off and that's why there's tremendous interest in the State Department that night about what was going on. But the next morning the riots began and this is the riots, principally in Jakarta but also in Malang and elsewhere and it was three days of rioting, burning of buildings in which the military played a very interesting role, apparently actually organizing some of the rioting, which leads me still to think that the military did have in mind a situation in which there would be rioting- by the way, President Suharto was out of the country at that time at a meeting in Cairo, which was again very suspicious in my mind. But we had three days of terrible rioting and I remember in the first day our embassy switchboard started getting calls from Chinese residents of the city pleading for the U.S. embassy to help them, that they were being attacked in their rather Chinese compounds, Chinese sections of the city, women were being raped and killed and so on. And I recall having the secretary at the switchboard send the messages up to the political section so we're talking to people who are screaming for help and so on. Meanwhile most of us of course are out in the city trying to report what was going on as best we could. And I got a couple of these calls and I said, especially the English speaking ones, I said forward this up to the ambassador's office. He got a couple of these calls. And I went up at that point, I said you know, we've got a situation that's coming out of control here, can't we contact the military here to at least go into these Chinese quadrants of the city to sort of establish some control there because it seems to be worse there? So he said yes and moreover I'm concerned about Americans living in certain sections, try to get the military out there to, you know, defend these areas against what is just wide scale rampant rioting.

Anyway. We started making the phone calls, couldn't reach any of our military contacts, no one would answer the phone. And it was at that point, I think I had said to him, sir if we can't reach the military then we basically cannot defend Americans in the city and, you know, this is the time we need to start talking about evacuation. So in the middle of this growing rioting in the city we began evacuation of the city of all Americans including the embassy staff, cutting way back on the embassy staff. But the thinking was that if we can't reach our supposed good friends in the military to act even to defend American citizens then this is not a stable situation for us.

Q: Well what was the reaction of our military attaché's office?



MCWILLIAMS: Interestingly they nominally were the ones attempting to contact the other military and not being successful at it. But some months after that I had been invited to a reception for the incoming new military attaché<sup>1/2</sup>, a rather good fellow, and in making small talk with a lot of the senior military, this is post rioting, practically post Suharto regime, this is some months later, I had talked about, I was talking about the new fellow coming in, speaks good Bahasa but of course, I said to this one particular general, he doesn't have the great language skills of his predecessor, who really knew your society and knew the language and so on. And I got sort of a noncommittal response from him. And I sort of said well you worked with him I'm sure. He says well we never really knew him very well. And what the take was, was that first of all he was always very close to Suharto's son-in-law, a guy named Prabowo, who was a general, very corrupt fellow, and he was sort of a rising star because of his relationship to Suharto, very much disliked within the ranks of the military but to which our military attaché<sup>1/2</sup> office essentially had attached itself. And this general said not only did we not know him well because he basically did his business through this one fellow but during the days of the rioting, did you know that he was with Prabowo in civilian clothes through most of the day, going from place to place? And frankly I didn't know that but I do recall him not being in the embassy during this critical first day of the riot. So the thinking was that unfortunately we had allied ourselves with elements within the military very close to this one commander, the son-in-law of the president, which might have seemed like a good idea but which alienated a lot of the other elements of the military who frankly resented the fact that this young son-of-a-bitch, forgive me for saying it, was rising so fast by virtue of his ties to the Suharto family. Anyway, it was a very complex environment.

Q: What happened?

MCWILLIAMS: Essentially the military belatedly stepped in. I think frankly the rioters simply got tired. After three days it began to quiet down. And the vice president, for whom no one had any respect, a fellow named Habibie, was moved in as the caretaker and did a reasonably good job.

Q: He was blind wasn't he?

MCWILLIAMS: No.

Q: No, this wasn't-



MCWILLIAMS: No, you're thinking of Wahid Gus Dur, who subsequently, yes, he was blind. But it was funny, people felt that when Habibie ran for president just before the rioting and so on took place, when I say ran for president, it's a parliamentary decision essentially, he had nominated this fellow Habibie, who nobody had respect for, who had frankly people felt he might even be a little crazy, and the thought was that Suharto, being clever politically, recognizing in '98 he was in trouble, decided to put someone in as vice president whom they'd never want to succeed him but nonetheless he did. And he was a very strange fellow but ultimately I think a rather good caretaker and of course as I mentioned earlier he made that critical decision to subsequent in January of '99 to allow a referendum in East Timor to the great disgust of the military and many of the nationalists in Indonesia but ultimately I think a wise decision.

Q: And how did we respond to Habibie? He won the election or?

MCWILLIAMS: Well it wasn't- he basically moved up on virtue of having been vice president and we wanted a transition that would be constitutional and so on. So we, who had personally been sniping at him viciously for years in our embassy reporting suddenly had him as a president. But as I say I think he was something of a surprise. He was a radic and said crazy things. And I can remember some CODELs that went very badly with him. But he basically held the fort and held things together and we didn't have a military transition, thank goodness, and although he didn't make it in the next reelection, he was succeeded by the cleric, Abdurrahman Wahid Gus Dur, he was an interesting fellow who basically held things together.

Q: You mentioned congressional delegations. Particularly in areas like Indonesia, the Philippines and all, Congress plays quite a role and they have interests and-

MCWILLIAMS: Very much so.

Q: -often concerns about human rights and this sort of thing that embassies would almost prefer-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: -not to deal with.

MCWILLIAMS: Very much the case.

Q: What was happening here.



MCWILLIAMS: Very much the case, very much the case in Indonesia. And the interesting thing that I found, and I've continued to work the Indonesia case really since '96, is that within Congress you have a very significant body of expertise about Indonesia, people who've gone to East Timor, gone to Indonesia, repeated trips sometimes, and there is, as you suggest, a very deep concern about human rights out there in the Congress and what I found striking and continue to be very pleasantly surprised about is that it goes across partisan lines. You have some of the very best friends of human rights in Indonesia, very conservative Republicans. At the same time you also have some very liberal democrats, progressive democrats, who are also dependable contacts and supporters for human rights in Indonesia, opponents of assistance to the military and so on. So it's frankly for me it was quite a revelation having always sort of been part of the executive administration to find first of all the degree of expertise on Indonesia that in fact was there in Congress but also the compassion, the concern, a willingness even to this day of significant Republican players in Congress to buck the administration vis-à-vis its policies of supporting the military for example in Indonesia. So I come away, I think from my years of government experience with a lot of respect for Congress, notwithstanding the problems that we all know too well of corruption and so on.

Q: What about congressional delegations during this critical time, this series of changes in the Indonesian government?

MCWILLIAMS: Well of course as you know when things get tough, when things are becoming unstable there is an effort by the State Department to sort of limit the number of CODELs, wisely I think, going out. So we didn't have in the really critical period too many staff dels or CODELs coming out. I do recall one though in particular, Chris Smith, who was a significant player on the House International Relations Committee then and now, a very conservative Republican out of New Jersey, had come out, had a long reputation of interest in human rights situation in Indonesia and I was able to put him together with Megawati and that went very well. They, I think he got- had a good impression of the kind of person she was and the people around her. I remember Mitch McConnell, another Republican coming out at that period. Again, I put them- put him together, I was his control officer, with Megawati's people, so that he had some sense that there is an alternative leadership that's not necessarily crazy, there's an alternative political future for Indonesia that's not necessarily military or Suharto family. I remember Madeleine Albright, now this is not a CODEL or staff del, coming out in, actually she came out in '99, this is after the change but she had a useful impact I think on our policy out there in that she had an opportunity to sit down with the East Timor leader, Xanana Gusmão, who was still in prison at that point, and I think had a very good impression of him, and as a consequence I think went back to Washington feeling that if in fact East Timor were to become independent there was a leadership there with which we could deal. Which was, I think, a pretty important understanding to have at the senior levels.



Q: Back on East Timor, as things developed, were you in consultation with the Australians?

MCWILLIAMS: There's an interesting episode there. Yes. Frankly, I had been very close to the Australians. I might add also the Canadians had a great embassy in Jakarta; small but great. But the Australians and this isn't so much a Jakarta problem, but actually the Australians had superb intelligence on what was developing in East Timor which for various reasons was not entirely shared with the U.S., which was really a breach of the confidential relationship we had at the international level for many years. There's a very involved story in which a defense attaché for Australian embassy here in D.C. was accused of having shared more than he should have shared with his American counterparts and as a consequence he was being called on the carpet for this, being pulled back, and he committed suicide here in Jakarta- here in Washington. Frankly I don't know the background of this because it wasn't set in Jakarta but although we had close relations with our friends in the Australians embassy there were problems in the relationship at that time.

Q: By the time you left what had happened?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, I left, unfortunately, just as things were breaking loose in July of '99. What I had done before I left my very good East Timor fellow, Gary Gray, had been reporting, I think very accurately, of the growing threat of the militias so I made one last trip out there in which I sought to see what was going on across the East Timor border in West Timor and made a trip from Dili, actually commandeering a taxi to do it to get me across the border because no one was moving at that time in East Timor on the roads. But I went into West Timor and then along the border back into East Timor, trying to see if I could see military build up or something that was going on on the other side of the border and I did see some things and I got that reporting out. But I think I didn't anticipate and I don't think certainly Washington didn't anticipate fully what the military had in mind if the referendum went against them.

I just was looking at some notes last night that I had written up. I did report, on the basis of that trip in, I guess June of '99, talk of a Plan B, which is to say what the military would do if they lost the referendum and it was pretty ominous. And that all got reported but Washington and the embassy didn't take it seriously enough and very frankly, to be fair, I don't think I fully anticipated how bad it would be.

Q: Yes. This was when they went in with- under the cover of militias-

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, exactly.

Q: -and practically leveled a country.



MCWILLIAMS: I had the assumption, made the assumption that so long as the international presence was there, the UN were there, it would be a restraining, there would be constraint. And it simply wasn't. And that was the amazing thing for me.

Q: I've had a long interview on all sorts of subjects but on later effects with Peter Galbraith who went in there.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes. He went in subsequently, of course. Yes.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: But that was a terrible time and just to reiterate the point I made earlier, I think, for my money historically the U.S. made a fundamental mistake in not leaning on the military to disband those militias. Because I think it would not have been possible for the Indonesian military to assault the UN as the militias did and that was the whole point of the militias. And unfortunately there's a fundamental flaw in the way we approached this. Stanley Roth, who was assistant secretary, who was out there like every four or five weeks it seems, I think was good. I think he got it and I think he made the points significantly that we wanted him to make, that you know, this is not working but we never took officially the position disband those militias. But as he was going out there representing the U.S. government you had very senior military players from the Pacific Command and so on going in there and they were taking a very different line. They were still being very soothing and kind in their discussions with the military, no hard points, no insisting that the militia things stop and so on and I think as a consequence the military chose to listen to our military, not surprisingly, which had a very soothing message, and frankly ignored this civilian. And as a consequence I think, U.S. policy was mis-presented and thereby misinterpreted and it was a mistake.

Q: Did you have any problems being the political consular during the last years of the Clinton administration with the scandals and the impeachment and all that sort of stuff?

MCWILLIAMS: Of course I was sitting back in Washington for most of that.

Q: Oh you were back in Washington? That's right, yes.



MCWILLIAMS: No, no, no. Actually, no. I was still in Jakarta. Yes, there were moments. I can recall, notwithstanding the fact that this was a Clinton administration, the embassy was, its politics were not really with the Clinton administration. And I can recall some rather stirring discussions in the team meetings on what was going on in Washington, yes. You don't probably remember the name Riatti but there was also-

Q: Oh yes.

MCWILLIAMS: -a scandal before the scandal.

Q: Big, big scandal.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Yes. And there's ties to the Clintons, weren't there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that was the allegation and in fact I think it was not just an allegation. But the embassy was called upon to produce documents that, as much as we could that would suggest what kind of a background there was there. And my impression is that the regime before the Roy administration had in fact been very close to the Riattis but those documents were very hard to find if you know what I mean. Anyway.

Q: Okay. Well, this is probably a good place to stop. And we'll pick this up the next time in 1999.

MCWILLIAMS: As I go back to the Department for my, actually my second Department job in 27 years.

Q: And what was that?

MCWILLIAMS: I was the director for international labor and human rights bureau.

Q: Great.



Okay. Today is the 23rd of January, 2006. Ed, going back, by 1999, where stood labor as a matter of interest to, you might say to our foreign policy Department of State? I sort of had the feeling this is very much- at one point this is, you know, a major focus and then it just sort of petered away.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, throughout much of the Cold War, again I have no personal experience on this but as the director for international labor obviously I learned quite a bit about the history of labor in the State Department. It had played a very major role in the context of the Cold War. Lane Kirkland and George Meany and so on of the AFL-CIO had worked very closely with U.S. diplomats to essentially foster an anti-communist posture in, particularly in nations where there was a real contest between the Soviet influence and U.S. influence.

Q: Europe of course the prime example.

MCWILLIAMS: Clearly in Europe but also in Latin America, very frankly.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: But and more than that, really. It had been a partner of U.S. diplomacy, quite effectively, I think, obviously the story of Solidarnosc in Poland is a prime example of that. I think in the post-Cold War period, though, and notwithstanding the fact we had a Democratic administration that was quite close to labor, the role of labor began to fade, I think particularly insofar as there simply was no longer a Cold War context in which it might partner with U.S. diplomacy. There was, however, during the '90s a greater focus on the need to look at worker rights issues, particularly in the context of the ILO's efforts around the world, to which the Clinton administration, I think, was quite committed. They, for example, moved very smartly, I think, in the '98-'99 period to develop child labor as an issue of concern for the international community.

Q: Well I think, too, at that time things, particularly clothing and other items had become so internationalized and it kept moving to the cheaper market.

MCWILLIAMS: Right, right.

Q: Was this a, you know, there were cartoons, an awful lot of interest among those involved in almost public affairs and the media and the entertainment and all about who made shoes.



MCWILLIAMS: Sure, Nike and so on. In point of fact, in the late '90s, shortly before I assumed this job, the AFL-CIO had spearheaded an effort within State Department to constitute a commission that would look at the role of labor in State with the intention, I think, of reasserting the importance of labor in U.S. diplomacy and trying to place it obviously in a new context, not simply as a warrior in the Cold War effort but rather to see itself as a new way of energizing labor diplomacy in the U.S. government.

Again, I came to all this very new. I'd never really worked on labor issues although I'd been involved in human rights issues. Except in the context of Indonesia I'd worked on behalf of a couple of union officials who were under the gun, almost literally, from the Suharto regime. As a consequence of that effort, which had a lot of visibility in Washington I came to this job, although without labor experience, nonetheless with something of a reputation with the AFL-CIO, which welcomed me into this position. But again, I would say and I would sort of emphasize this position, I really wasn't- I didn't have the experience really to take the job.

Q: Well, had in a way labor melded with human rights?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. In the middle '90s and I can't remember quite the date, the human right bureau, as we call it, was reformulated to essentially absorb humanitarian affairs and human rights issues. It became the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. Now, within that context, before and certainly while I was there, democracy and human rights initiatives clearly had the focus and labor was sort of the least important element of that trio although I think thanks in large part to my boss, a woman named Sandra Polaski, who was pulled in from the union side to work as a special advisor, really, on labor affairs within the bureau, thanks to her leadership, particularly in terms of involving our office and the bureau in the development of trade pacts with a number of nations, I think we obtained a much higher profile than we had previously in that bureau. In particular we worked on trade agreements with Cambodia and with Jordan and tried to get one with Chile. The point being that she almost single handedly, of course with our support, worked I think quite successfully, to ensure that worker rights issues were part and parcel of these trade agreements. If you remember that one of the great complaints about NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) was that worker rights issues really didn't play a very significant role in-

Q: NAFTA is the North American Trade Agreement.

MCWILLIAMS: Free Trade Agreement, right.

Q: Between really Canada, Mexico and the United States.



MCWILLIAMS: Right, right. And one of the criticisms of that, and there have been many, was that worker interests, worker rights, were not really taken into account. Specifically, worker interests in the U.S., a lot of workers felt themselves displaced because of the movement of jobs overseas to Mexico, particularly. By the same token I think the concern was that worker rights were not necessarily respected, particularly in Mexico, because there was very little in the treaty to ensure that Mexico in particular would protect worker rights. So the point was as we moved to new trade agreement, given Sandra Polaski's experience with NAFTA, she was personally involved in some of that, she sought to ensure that environment concerns but also particularly worker rights issues, were part of the new trade frameworks.

Q: Well in a way we were looking harder, weren't we, at not just unions but the working environment? I mean, this was, which was again you could almost say this is part of human rights. I mean, if people are being exploited in the workplace it's as bad as being, you know, almost any other humanitarian rights concerns.

MCWILLIAMS: Because this is a tape you can't see me nodding vigorously but I'm nodding vigorously. You know, absolutely. And I think that was one of the things that we tried to do at least while I was there, to associate the whole concept of worker rights, to integrate that into human rights issue because in fact worker right are human rights in a very broad context. I mean, we deal with people trafficking, we deal with child labor issues, abusive labor conditions and so on, these are all part of human rights. So we tried to make that point to the Department. I think in the past and I think your observation is very well taken, most people in the State Department and most people perhaps in the United States, when they hear a reference to worker rights they think in terms of trade unions and the right to organize and the right to petition grievances and so on through a union structure which is clearly also a human right but it goes beyond that. And we tried to broaden the concept of worker rights during my tenure. I think this was relatively effective. We, for example, traveled extensively while I was director, visiting places where worker rights were challenged. I remember specifically a couple of trips to Guatemala where actually trade unions were being challenged but more broadly worker rights were an issue. And it was a very interesting experience and I think a broadening one for me because as I say I began to understand myself that worker rights issues were important in a human rights context.

Q: When you got there, did you find that you were often at odds, particularly the economic or was it the EB bureau or something? Anyway because, I mean you'd weigh in and you'd be screwing up the things when you're trying to deal with Guatemala or something like that. I mean, how'd you find that?



MCWILLIAMS: Well yes, that was a problem. I remember in particular there was a new piece of legislation called AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act), the African, my goodness, what did it stand for? Well, basically it was an agreement; I can't remember what the acronym stood for, AGOA.

Q: Is it AGOA?

MCWILLIAMS: AGOA. Whereby we would grant, this is a Congressional-driven initiative which the administration supported, we would grant special trade privileges to specific African nations if in fact they met certain criteria, those criteria in the area of democracy promotion but also respect for worker rights. Now, the attitude of the trade bureau, the trade people and certainly the trade people at State, was very much just simply to pursue these agreements as quickly as possible, establish these agreements. We on our side, worker rights side and to some extent on the human rights side, were sort of the fly in the ointment because what we sought to do was using principally the annual human rights report but also NGO reporting to the extent we could find it on Africa to bring to light the fact that individual African nations had very severe human rights problems and had very significant worker rights problems and our contention was we ought to use this opportunity to establish trade relations with the United States as leverage whereby we could sort of improve, hope to improve worker rights problems, human rights problems, democracy in a particular country. And it was a hard fight because clearly the instinct of the Department was simply to promote trade. This is also very much what the trade-

Q: Department of Commerce.

MCWILLIAMS: Department of Commerce and also the-

Q: Special Trade Representative.



MCWILLIAMS: Special Trade Representative's office, that's right. So we had many contentious discussions about individual countries and where they would rank in terms of provision of trade, which countries would make the cut and so on. And lots of lots of fighting. I recall several trips to Africa that I made and a couple of my assistants made specifically to collect information on the ground where we couldn't resolve disputes. So it was a very energetic process and I think a useful process, as I say, because while trade relations did move forward we were able to hold back some until we could get promises from the government to make improvements in certain areas and I look at that as a very combative period but one which I think was useful. It's interesting to my mind as I reflect back that although legislation called for progress in democracy, progress in general human rights, the bureau basically didn't have that much interest in this whole game. And as a consequence the worker rights effort, from our little office, sort of took preeminence for the bureau, that we represented the bureau and we're making arguments about democratization and human rights issues outside of the worker rights context. But it was a very interesting period which I enjoyed very much.

Q: Can you talk about maybe a country about sort of the compromises that may- I mean, I assume there were certain compromises within the department. You may say okay, they haven't gone this far in democracy but they have gone here and we'll sign off on this or in general.

MCWILLIAMS: That's essentially the way- I'm trying to remember some specific examples. I'm not having much luck with it. In the African context I can remember we debated about slavery in Mauritania. I actually made two trips to Equatorial Guinea, although that was on a separate issue, I'll have to talk to you about that certainly. We did also though, however, apply pretty much the same principle to trade agreement and trade preference opportunities for states in the Caribbean and Central America and in particular I remember Guatemala. There was a situation in which union leaders were being intimidated, very severely beaten and so on. And we were able essentially to hold the U.S. government to the position that absent justice in the case of some union leaders who had been very, very badly mistreated, absent justice by the government of Guatemala, prosecution of those who had carried out this intimidation, they could not move forward with a trade agreement with the United States. And we were able successfully to get the government down there to essentially make the kinds of changes that we wanted. I think we were very happy with that. But there were other efforts. We were concerned about child labor in Honduras. We visited El Salvador. We went to Nicaragua where there was a lot of abuse of workers, workers essentially being held within factories. And simply by going to these places as a U.S. delegation and appearing on the minister of labor's doorstep and sometimes actually meeting with the vice president or president and saying that we were concerned about these issues we got their attention. And I think we had some good impact.

Q: How about the feedback from, I mean, who was feeding you the information where to go at the embassy?



MCWILLIAMS: The embassies often were less than welcoming of these efforts. Obviously it was in their interest to promote relations, bilateral relations to include trade agreements and so on at a macro level and we were coming in sort of looking at these lesser problems. But to the extent that we relied very heavily on the annual human rights report, which often was quite candid in describing the problem, the embassies and the desks back in Washington and the bureaus I might even add, which did get involved, the African bureau for example, the NRA, were not in a position to deny the facts that we presented because they often came directly from our human rights report. So we were able to push that quite hard.

I might say another place we got involved, as I think about this; we began to pay much more attention to reporting from various embassies. When we would hear from, for example, Solidarity centers around particularly in the Caribbean area or Central American area of problems developing in a country through NGO channels essentially we would then go to the embassy with a straightforward cable saying we've heard reports about this, could you give us the details? And the point of fact was often these embassies were reporting these details. It was our plan to get this info the human report, to get this into the traffic that there had been some violation of worker rights. And as I say, in Africa and in Latin America we were quite successful. One place we failed was South Korea because there were serious labor problems in South Korea but we could never convince the embassy to report these in a matter of fact way. We were successful in many areas and I think able to shine a light on worker rights abuse that was effective in some cases in ameliorating some of those conditions.

Q: You know, things are changing rapidly with communications and the growth of NGOs, non-governmental organizations, which used to be a minor little sort of element of our foreign affairs establishment but have grown to be a major element. How did you- you must have been one of the places that was more plugged in to the NGO community, weren't you?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, very much so. I think I began to appreciate the role of NGOs when I was in Jakarta principally because in the other countries where I'd been often there was almost no NGO presence. There was in Nicaragua post-Sandinista but of course in the communist states there was really no NGO effort. So I became more aware of the NGOs, first of all by virtue of sort of representing the people at a grassroots level in ways sometimes the government didn't. There was concern at the NGO level. And I'm not talking about international NGOs at this point but the local NGOs. There were concerns that often were reflected even in the press and certainly not in government policy so that it was good to hear that attitude expressed. Plus, as I say, just as a source of information we would get channels that, you know, were not open to us through any other means, we'd learn of things were developing, I think again of Indonesia but also specifically in my job as director of international labor we were able to get feeds from various NGO sources, international and local, that gave us insights that we were not getting from the embassy reporting or the media.



Q: Did you find any NGOs were particularly useful, informative?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, we worked quite closely with the Solidarity Center of the AFL-CIO in the labor context. That probably was the richest source of information. It was interesting because while we certainly had a good relationship with the Washington central office, the central, of course Solidarity Center, I very much appreciated direct contact with Solidarity Center offices in the field who often, frankly, would give us a deeper perspective than we would get from the Solidarity Center. Getting that raw flow I can remember many messages coming in, please don't share this with my boss but this is what's happening, this is what's going on. And for various reasons this information wouldn't filter through to the Solidarity Center here in Washington but by establishing direct contact with people in the field again, sometimes as a consequence of direct travel we were able to get a very, I think very keen insights sometimes.

Q: How were you getting this? By phone or by fax?

MCWILLIAMS: E-mail and phone.

Q: E-mail and phone. You mentioned before about being able to talk directly from the makeshift morgue to the state operations center but what I'm gathering is that we're getting to have a more porous information source that's coming within our government to people who have particular interests you develop your own ties.

MCWILLIAMS: I think that certainly has worked for me. You have to understand that often this raw information, if you're trying to bring it to a table, for example, to discuss a policy issue and you've got a report from the field directly from some particular, especially a local NGO, there would be questioning of the validity of it, oh they've got an ax to grind and so on. So the process would often entail, as I mentioned earlier, going back to the embassy and saying we're getting this reporting from the field, we're hearing these accounts, often not identifying specifically who was giving us those reports and then asking the embassy to go out and check and to verify. And more often than not once that information came in of course then we could use it very effectively at the table and negotiation with other bureaus so that that would work sometimes.

Q: Did you, first place in human rights reports that we have to come up every year, was sort of the labor component melded into that?



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. This is another thing that was an issue. While I was involved I can't take much credit for we began to understand the value of taking elements out of those reports and then using them in our dialogue with our counterparts in the State Department so there was evermore a tight focus on what was being reported. And I think as we looked at these reports country by country by some extent and I should say in conjunction with the Department of Labor, they had International Labor Bureau there, which was very helpful to us, they had manpower to help us and indeed they had some officers sent from Labor over to us to assist us in the office for long periods, very effective officers. But looking at these individual country reports often the problem was not that they misreported the labor situation they simply didn't report the labor situation. So we would go back and make specific requests of what was happening in the trafficking area, for example, which became very big; what about child labor; things that weren't getting reported by the embassy but that we'd seen in the media and so on. And basically by asking for this kind of reporting it began to flow in a more effective way and in a greater volume. But it entailed checking almost all country reports for the labor component to see what was going on. The way I organized my team and as I say this included several offices from the Department of Labor, was that each one, in addition to functional portfolios, would have a geographic portfolio and I would ask them to become experts on Latin America, experts on Asia so that they would be the person to go to when I had a particular incident say in China, I had an office that was dealing with Asia and China. And of course I would encourage each of those offices to travel to their region, because we had pretty good travel funds, during their tours.

Q: Travel funds from Labor mainly? Or did you get them from the State Department?

MCWILLIAMS: No, these were State travel funds. They were travel funds within the bureau. We would sometimes be accompanied by an officer from the Department of Labor but they were essential State-initiated trips.

There was one other thing I should mention in this context. When I traveled to Equatorial Guinea there were at various points our bureau, the Bureau of Human Rights and Labor, Democracy of Human Rights and Labor, were asked to check off on bilateral and multilateral assistance programs. Can you just drop that off for a second please?

Q: You were saying there's an outfit that both-



MCWILLIAMS: Yes. This is a U.S. agency which provides insurance funds for U.S. corporations seeking to do business overseas and the name of which is on the tip of my tongue but I can't recall. But they- in order to do this they would have to basically go through a checklist that in fact this firm was a good firm, that in fact the project did not appear to entail any human rights violations, moreover that there was no particular problem in the country. And one project that came up and I think frankly for a long time it had been a rubber stamp operation. There wasn't really any focus in the bureau that I could see to whether or not in fact these considerations were taken into full account. But there was a project essentially to underwrite gas and oil development for Equatorial Guinea. Equatorial Guinea had and has a very abusive government and it was very easy to raise some red flags on this one. And the decision was made that this was something that they really wanted to move forward with because it was gas and oil, it was a new field and great potential and they wanted to move forward but this was an abysmal government. So what they did was to constitute a Labor and State Department team to go out to Equatorial Guinea and review the situation and see what kind of commitments we could get from the government to improve not so much worker rights issues but human rights issues. And I recall we met with the president and other ministers because they recognized how important this would be, essentially a U.S. government imprimatur for U.S. industry development of gas and oil. And we made a couple of trips out there and we did draw the commitments although in retrospect I don't think we really leveraged much improvement of the situation up there. I think some of the abuses occurred simply by virtue of the fact that there was more American attention to the issues out there but I can't say as there has been any kind of evolution.

Q: What sort of abuses were there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that government had- it's a very strange situation which you have an island and a piece of mainland. And there was one tribe which essentially had achieved dominance and was essentially profiting itself and its members over the majority which were basically relegated to very poor circumstances back on the mainland and those of the majority who were on the islands were also given very short shrift. And it was an abusive government, a government that would not allow criticism and was very abusive of its enemies, political enemies, those that had sought to run against the government in very controlled elections were marginalized and some were actually imprisoned and so on. So I mean, there's just a litany of abuse by this government which was widely acknowledged but as I say, the interest of the U.S. was essentially a corporate interest to proceed with gas and oil development so they were determined that this was going to move forward and we were sort of employed to make it look better. And I think I regret my willingness to go along on that. I think this is a place where I should have drawn a line in the sand. But I wanted to get out there and see for myself and having once gone you sort of became a part of the "solution".



Q: One of the things with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic decline of much of western Russia but including Ukraine and Belarus and all that you had a whole flood of women, young women usually into prostitution who were coming out. When you use the term trafficking this is what you mean, isn't it?

MCWILLIAMS: Right. Not entirely but we'll get into that.

Q: Okay. But would you say how this fit in in what we were doing because this is a critical time in this whole process?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. There was a great deal of interest in Congress and also in the State Department about the problem of trafficking in people and this is sort of late '90s when this began to emerge. And specifically Congress insisted that there be an office set up at State to monitor the problem of trafficking in people. It was perceived at the time as essentially a problem of trafficking for prostitution to include child prostitution. We sought to make the point that while that was certainly a valid concern there was another kind of trafficking and that was trafficking for labor, basically people being either tricked or forced or compelled by circumstance to move across borders to accept employment and then fall into a situation where their rights were simply not respected, the pay was not provided and so on, a whole array of abuse for labor. And this would entail males and females and children I might add. And it was common in many parts of the world and we found it a little difficult to argue our case that in sheer numbers the problem of trafficking in people manifested itself much more as a labor problem than it did actually even as a prostitution problem while that got the headlines.

Q: I hate to use the term but it was sexier.

MCWILLIAMS: It was sexier. You know, it was and the media played that up. But I was very interested to learn, this is sort of post my involvement of course in this, just talking to some labor officers at lunch yesterday- this past week, Congress has now apparently begun to perceive this much more as a problem of transportation of labor into conditions of- to very, very bad involving worker rights abuses, which is interesting because that was an evolution we tried to encourage and I frankly think not very successful at that even in my own bureau; they saw it as a woman's issue or a child trafficking issue but apparently now it is understood in its broader context which is very good I think.

Q: Were you able to make any inroads into this?

MCWILLIAMS: In terms of prostitution?



Q: Well, I mean the whole trafficking thing.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, well no I mean, I don't think I can, I certainly can't claim credit for myself or even my office but what had happened during that period was Congressional interest once again sort of led the way. Money was mandated by Congress to set up an office to follow this issue much more effectively, reporting requirements were put upon State that it had to report specifically to the Congress about trafficking on a worldwide basis almost parallel to the annual human rights report. Another area of comparable interest was of course religious freedoms issue. But this, and I guess is sort of a point I get back to a number of times in my presentation, this is another example where the Congress played I think a very constructive role in insisting that the administration pay more attention to an issue and in a more consistent way. We'd had trafficking in people as an element of the annual human rights report for many years but it was the Congress that insisted we had to address this as a separate issue and again I think hats off to them for that.

Q: Where- at the time- In the first place, you were in this job from '99 to when?

MCWILLIAMS: 2001.

Q: Where did you see the interest in these matters in Congress? Was it a committee of staff, a Congressperson?

MCWILLIAMS: There were several offices, I think of Senator Harkin's office, which had long been interested in child issues and certainly child labor issues. One of his assistants, Bill Gould, who is now executive director of the progressive caucus in Congress was a particularly articulate and insistent voice on worker rights issues and frankly helped educate me quite a bit. But again I think a point I've made earlier what was an interesting and sort of heartening was that this was not simply a liberal Democrat issue where you'd expect the sensitivity to labor and so on. In point of fact to the extent it was seen as a human rights issue you had people across the political spectrum who were interested in this including some Congressional staffers and Republican Congressmen and Senators. I'm trying to think of some specifics but I'd rather not get into specifics other than to mention Harkin who was very, very much a leader because it would be a little unfair to forget others. But it was a broad issue and an issue that drew a lot of interest. I know for example right now Senator Brambach is very interested in these issues, specifically trafficking issues and a very conservative Republican for example, just to give attention to both sides. So that was very welcome. Anyway. But again, working fairly closely with Congress particularly again back in the context of developing these trade agreements there was a great deal of interest in Congress about the shape of those agreements and whether or not they would include worker rights components and environment concern components.



Q: Where did- you mentioned the Chile thing fell apart. Was that on any of your issues?

MCWILLIAMS: Chile, it was unfortunate. Chile was very anxious to pursue an agreement with Washington and it simply kept getting bucked to second in line by other agreement which seemed to take precedence through no fault of its own. It was a very complex period. I remember we put them aside to move forward with an agreement with Singapore with the promise that they would be next in line and then of course we began to pursue broader relationships at that time with Brazil and Argentina. So it was unfortunate in a sense but a trade agreement eventually was reached with the Chileans which you know, it had been one of the more progressive governments in Latin America.

Q: Looking at the child and labor problems, I'm looking at two mammoth outfits, China and India.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Did you get, I mean, what was happening, what were your interests there and what was happening there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well. With China it was a perception problem. No one could contend that there were not vast worker rights problems in China, similarly in Vietnam which is in some ways parallel. On the other hand the impetus for trade with China and even with Vietnam at a much lower level was so strong that there were compromises made that I think in retrospect shouldn't have been made. In the Vietnam case I speak of more specifically because I remember being rather deeply engaged with that. There's a Vietnam union, a national union very much controlled by the Vietnamese communist party which did not to any extent reflect the interests of the workers and similarly in China. Nonetheless the AFL-CIO, which was a partner in much of this work at least during the Clinton years...which was a modest step forward but did not begin to address the pretty fundamental problems of workers in China or Vietnam.

With regards to India I never did get terribly deeply involved in India. At that point China was simply more important and of course we were moving towards a bilateral trade agreement with China.

Q: I was thinking that in India and particularly Pakistan you've got an awful lot of child labor, at least that's my impression.



MCWILLIAMS: There was a lot of complexity there because there is an organization called RUGMARK which- in India and I believe Pakistan sought to ensure that only rugs that were not made with child labor would enter the U.S. market or at least be bought by U.S. consumers. That is to say there was an effort to ensure that people were aware that you could buy clean rugs, that is to say rugs not made with child labor if you looked for the RUGMARK trademark essentially on these rugs. I remember being a little skeptical, frankly, to the extent that that was effective but nonetheless that was the way it was addressed in that context.

I'm trying to remember a couple of other issues. Well, the details escape me. I should have done more reading. But we also of course came to blows to some extent over the issue of China's entry into the World Trade Organization. And again, it was well above our office but a concern that certain prerequisites that the Chinese were expected to meet before they became part of the World Trade Organization in our estimation were not being met. We had allies in Congress who agreed with us but nonetheless it was the Clintons, the Clinton administration's determination to push forward with that that ultimately ruled the day.

I'm sort of caught talking about the Clinton administration but I did have six months or so in the Bush administration.

Q: Well anyway, stick to China. In the first place, when you think about trade with China, first place, one it's huge, a lot of people. The other thing is that the central government essentially does not have a hell of a lot of control over a lot of the labor stuff. I mean, it may not be war lordism but it's certainly local communist little czars all over the place.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: And you know, what was said in Beijing does not necessarily, the writ does not necessarily really penetrate to many places.



MCWILLIAMS: You're right. In a sense you're dealing with various situations within the same country. Although I recall specifically working with some dissidents who had positioned themselves in Hong Kong and who sought to report about worker rights issues and abuse in China. And China's response was a national response and to the extent that those people who were trying to get word out about worker rights abuse in China were being repressed by the national government it wasn't national policy which we were ultimately concerned with because very clearly reform, particularly grassroots reform was something that China at that time was trying to prevent and was quite aggressive in regards to that. I remember trying and occasionally succeeding in bringing the U.S. embassy into our efforts to petition on behalf of worker rights advocates, union leaders who had been picked up by the Chinese. So we saw this very much as a bilateral issue and concern. The model might almost be that of our relationship with Moscow in the Cold War period that when it became- when we became aware of individuals who were fighting for reform, fighting for worker rights who were abused or threatened or jailed we did seek to put that on our bilateral agenda.

Q: But you're feeling that the train had already left the station towards going to be- for China to be in the World Trade Organization?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes and clearly, you know, U.S. investment was not about to be throttled back over worker rights issues, worker rights concerns nor was the Clinton administration likely to back off its support for that kind of globalization for trade.

Q: Well was it a feeling okay, we might not be able to get something now but the fact that they're in the World Trade Organization; it gives us something to keep sticking it to the Chinese over a period of time? I mean, was this within our thought process?

MCWILLIAMS: I think their entry into the World Trade Organization as a question for U.S. policy essentially revolved upon- revolved around the questions of how would this impact U.S. economic interests. And I think that so dominated our consideration of those questions that the issue of worker rights was pretty much off the table.

Q: Well I mean, but looking at the World Trade Organization, did you see this as okay, where economic interests take over at certain times but it does give you a tool which can be used from time to time or not?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, I'm sure that was the case except to say that I think it, even today it's very unlikely that those tools would be used in defense of worker rights, rather that they would be used in defense of perceived U.S. economic interests. Again, human rights in general and worker rights specifically I think are very rarely central to our concerns.



Q: Did you feel that looking at yourself as the-

MCWILLIAMS: I should say unfortunately.

Q: Unfortunately.

MCWILLIAMS: I think my own feelings could play a much more significant role.

Q: Did you see running the- dealing with the American program concerned about workers rights and human rights that you as the Americans we were kind of way out ahead of everybody else or were there other countries that were doing the same thing?

MCWILLIAMS: No, no. I think the Europeans generally showed a lot of sensitivity to worker rights issues and indeed I think the trade union movement in Europe was at least as aggressive and progressive in defending worker rights as was the AFL-CIO. So no, I think it partnered very well with us. Again, I think my greatest respect would be for those trade unions and those NGOs working on worker human rights in specific Third World countries and not just Third World countries but developing countries who at some risk were advocating on behalf of workers. And I think often their courage and efforts often inspired trade union movements in the United States and Europe to become more active on behalf of worker rights in those particular situations.

Q: Well did you find yourself, talking about you and your office and all, working in conjunction and with say the European Union people or were you each going out and-

MCWILLIAMS: No, not too much. There was some contact but our principle trade union contact of course would be with and through the AFL-CIO. But I recall specifically that trade unions movement in Europe produced some very, very good reports on worker rights issues which we relied on very much in building our case for the U.S. policy changes and U.S. policy intervention on behalf of worker rights in various countries. They had some very, very good reporting out of Africa, for example, places where the AFL-CIO was not traditionally active. I think the AFL-CIO coverage of Central and Latin America, for example, of course was very good. Coverage of Asia was quite good but some of the areas were not.

Q: Well traditionally the Scandinavian countries which are- have strong socialist leanings have been disproportionately involved in Africa, I think.



MCWILLIAMS: Well also I think of the Germans, the Germans had a very good progressive trade union movement. And British unions of course were excellent. So there was, I think at that time significant trade union attention to worker rights issues and our difficulty was trying to get that brought to the table for U.S. policy consideration.

I should say one other thing that sort of was part of at least my brief tenure there. I think I made reference to this earlier. The AFL-CIO in the middle Clinton years had petitioned for and received agreement of State to create a commission that would within State look at the use of and deployment of labor officers in the Foreign Service. We had the senior ranks of the AFL-CIO who would join us in this commission effort periodically and discuss what might be done to advance the role of labor officers in the Foreign Service. John Sweeney was part of that; Linda Chavez was part of that. Also we had significant representation from the business side and it was an interesting exercise, essentially an effort to revitalize the role for labor officers. I wrote something that I might just reference in the Foreign Service Journal in 2001 about a new role for labor officers in the Foreign Service reflecting on the important role that labor played during the Cold War and trying to make the case that in the post-Cold War period human rights and worker rights issues deserve the same kind of commitment by U.S. policymakers as did the effort to fight communism and that labor officers could play a significant role in that. That was published some time in 2001, I can't remember exactly when.

Q: Did you find that at our embassies labor and human rights were usually melded together?

MCWILLIAMS: Often. Often they were and unfortunately often they were not very significant factor except where there had been media expose about particular human rights violations or worker rights violations. But it would usually require that for an embassy to give much attention to those issues most often, and I think it's true today, the human rights portfolio, the worker rights portfolio, is assigned to the lowest ranking officer, usually in the political section and as a consequence those officers, often first tour officers, are not in a position to do the advocacy for those issues within the embassy bureaucracy. And I see that as a continuing problem.

Q: Well I would think one thing that would be working in your favor from time to time during this period would be that major newspapers such as The New York Times, The Washington Post maybe The Los Angeles Times and a few others, every once in awhile will send out one of their reporters who will come back with a horrendous story-

MCWILLIAMS: Expose.

Q: -about Country X and exploitation of this or that, I mean, very, you know, very vivid stories.



MCWILLIAMS: Yes.

Q: Was this happening?

MCWILLIAMS: Sure. And I mean, I welcomed this of course but too often these were episodic, there was no systematic coverage of the problem in the region, for example. But in those instances, of course, it was an opportunity to ask the embassy to give us the background and so on. And I'm not going to cite specific examples but I can certainly remember my experience in Jakarta; too often the response of the embassy was to seek to find fault with these exposes that these, what do they call them? Fire chasing journalists, they copy them, they don't know the grounds and they come in and they file all these reports and they get the government all riled up. And the sense was, as I say, to be defensive first of all of the regime to which we have relations which is upset and also I suppose to sort of cover their backside that they have been missing this story themselves.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: So again, I think too often the response to these expose stories is not as constructive as perhaps it should be.

Q: Well were you seeing, because of the various exposes and all the attention, a change or improvement in the lot of say textile workers in some of the major places?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, one of the concerns that we ran into, and this is a legitimate argument-

Q: And shoes, I'll include that.



MCWILLIAMS: Shoes. Was that if you push too hard on these industries that may be underpaying workers or forcing them to work in very difficult conditions, dangerous health conditions, health-wise, that the alternative would be that well if you push too hard these firms are going to close up and go elsewhere, they'll leave Indonesia and go to Bangladesh where they can get even cheaper wages, you know, and thereby you've essentially given all of these workers that had been at this plant in Indonesia they're now out of a job. And that was true. But I think my sense was that in general a worker shouldn't be faced with a choice of a bad job or no job. That's not a choice, it's a dilemma. And that we should be working to ensure that conditions are improved and we should not be working to see that a plant is shut down unless it's so- the conditions are so horrendous that it needs to be shut down. But again you go back to the U.S. manufacturer and so often the dodge was well these are our suppliers but they're not- they're under contract with us but we don't run them, we don't seek to ensure that conditions are as they should be because we simply have a contract with them, they're our suppliers. And what we sought to do and what a number of NGOs in the U.S. have sought to do is to make these large firms responsible for the conduct of their suppliers and their contractors. And there's been some progress on that.

Q: Did you find any pressure on you from businesses; hey take it easy on us and that sort of thing? I mean, we're supplying jobs and don't-?

MCWILLIAMS: Oh sure. I mean, inevitably if you are concerned about what's happening to workers in the Coca-Cola bottling plants in Colombia, for example, and if you're seeking to shape U.S. policy so it's concerned about their fate, obviously Coca-Cola is going to be petitioning against you. But usually insofar as you had good facts about abuses you could go pretty far, at least in the Clinton administration. I think things have changed drastically in a much more corporate friendly Bush administration.

Q: Tell me, you were in the- you had six months of the Bush administration.

MCWILLIAMS: Right. I left in September so actually I had essentially eight months of the Bush administration.

Q: Did you sense a change in that period of time?



MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes. Yes. I think at least initially, and again, I left four days before 9/11 so that was another change of course, but I think initially the Bush administration vis-à-vis human rights wanted to be perceived as being every bit as sympathetic to democratic advances and human rights advances as had been the previous administration so that those issues were given some space at State. On the other hand labor, because it was seen- I can remember very distinctly the phrasing of the assistant secretary as an adjunct of the AFL-CIO at least in terms of my leadership of that office, labor had a lot of problems because labor was obviously not something the new administration was going to look fondly upon. I should say initially though, for example, this commission had been set up that was looking at the role of labor in foreign policy. Initially the reaction was healthy, I think. I met with Deputy Secretary Armitage to seek his permission to allow the commission to continue its work because it hadn't filed its final report and we had a very candid discussion and the outcome of which was yes, go ahead, we can let them do what they're doing, finish their reporting and so on. So that process did continue. I think after my departure it did fall apart. But I can remember very specifically trying very hard to shape the role of labor in a way that the Republicans could buy into it. We tried to make the case, for example, that often overseas the labor officer was the most valuable person in- one of the most valuable people in the embassy for incoming U.S. investors because if they wanted to know what the labor laws were about, what the labor market was this was the expert who could really advise them as they began to set up their investment projects. And I think to some extent even the Chamber of Commerce saw the labor officer as an asset in these embassies. So we made that argument.

And then I also tried to make the argument, I recall, to Lorne Craner, who was the assistant secretary at that time, that in fact throughout the Cold War period labor, international labor had been a consistent ally of the U.S. in the anti-communist effort, obviously Lech Walesa, but he was persuaded that in fact trade unions generally would work against dictatorships. I mean, there's lots of evidence of that and he was persuaded that was true. Where he refused to accept my argumentation was I said that in addition that once there was a transition to democracy trade unions can continue to play a very positive role in articulating concerns of the broad masses and so on, acting as a loyal opposition to corporate interests and so on within a political framework; he wouldn't buy that. He didn't see a role for trade unions once the transition to democracy had been made. Didn't see them as political players, as having a rightful political place. And for that reason I think from that point forward the one person in the State Department whom you would have looked to to advocate for labor diplomacy and worker rights issues in a political context, we just didn't have him with us. His predecessor, Harold Koh, now dean of Yale Law School, didn't actually know a great deal about labor but instinctively was with us so that when we'd get into these arguments with other bureaus he was there and essentially giving us carte blanche to represent the bureau and even coming in personally behind us when we needed his weight. We didn't have that in the transition to the Bush administration and as a consequence I think first of all the DRL bureau was marginalized because it wasn't a real player on policy questions but then even within the bureau the little labor office was also marginalized so it became a much less, I fear, effective office.



Q: Well then you left there in 2001?

MCWILLIAMS: Right. In September of 2001.

Q: And what happened?

MCWILLIAMS: The whole thing fell apart. No, I went on to work on human rights issues, working with various NGOs on a pro bono basis.

Q: This was- you retired?

MCWILLIAMS: I retired, yes. I did not choose to go back in as a WAE (When Actually Employed) or in other context. Frankly the last six months were fairly bitter, embittering I should say. I didn't have a good relationship with the new forces there. Sandra Polaski, who continued on well after my departure was still my boss and a woman I had great admiration for but she was not in a position to, I think to be as effective as she had been during the Clinton years.

Q: You know, I mean, a lot of people looked forward to the arrival of Colin Powell and Rick Armitage. You know, this is a very professional, very personable group.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, yes.

Q: But did you feel that impact going down?



MCWILLIAMS: Clearly. And I think it was really a breath of fresh air when Colin Powell moved in. Madeleine Albright had been someone, I think, whom officers generally respected but the problem partly was that she was relatively narrow in her experience. That is, she was a Europeanist who didn't really know many other parts of the world and as a consequence I think her involvement and her willingness to press the State Department perspective on issues concerning Asia or for that matter Africa just wasn't there sometimes. I think Powell, on the other hand, was first of all a very different personality while Madeleine, I think, was genuine and caring about individual officers, for Powell it was part of his religion. He would literally walk the halls; he would literally walk into an office to meet people. And I think his arrival was perceived as an opportunity to really turn things around in the U.S. federal bureaucracy and in fact I think he did. I mean, he got money for us out of Congress. For many years, as you know, Congress had been under funding State and I think State in general under Christopher and under Madeleine Albright didn't play the lead role that it might have played in foreign policy development in the administration, the Clinton administration or even the previous Bush administration. But I think under Powell clearly we had a seat at the table on policy issues but I think even more than that was his impact on morale because as I say he was seen as and demonstrated himself to be genuinely concerned about individuals.

I recall his first day at State. Word spread around I think the night before his arrival that he would be arriving at the front entrance, would not be going in through the secret port downstairs in the elevator and so on, he was going to come in the front doors, and spontaneously people simply went down to the lobby to greet him and it was like a rock star coming in. I mean cheers and so on. And I recall him stopping on the steps leading up from the lobby there to give an impromptu address and so on. And he was a very good politician. I mean, he was very personable and I think people- and I should say also I think the fact that he was a person of color made a big difference because in that crowd it was not just the Foreign Service officers but a lot of the staff, the secretaries and so on were there because he was seen in a sense as a great Democrat, he was one of all of us. And I think that was very exciting. And I think it did a lot for morale over the years. I think in retrospect, and this would of course extend past my time there, his effective subordination on critical policy issues to the Pentagon and to the vice president's office I think ultimately has left a pretty foul taste in the mouth of many of my former colleagues, that he just didn't have the will to resist some very bad policy choices. But nonetheless I think he personally remained popular and still is popular at State as having been a man who cared about his troops as he used to say and who did get money for State, actually, out of Congress.

Q: Well then, you say you work off and on pro bono for various human rights organizations?



MCWILLIAMS: Mostly human rights organizations. I did a little traveling. I went over to, I went to Afghanistan in early 2002 essentially to sort of ground myself a little bit in what was going on over there and make old- renew old contacts and did a little bit of writing on the basis of my Afghan interests. But more I think I have been mostly involved essentially with human rights issues vis-à-vis Indonesia and East Timor where I work in some ways almost daily now, lobbying issues related to Indonesia.

Q: Well what's happening in your particular field, human rights and all, in East Timor and Indonesia?

MCWILLIAMS: Well the great fight in Indonesia really just continues back from my tour there back to '96 of a concern that the Indonesian military is, has been and continues to be a rogue institution operating essentially with impunity before the Indonesian courts. Its abuses of human rights, its corrupt, terribly corrupt institution and we see it as a threat, not only to individual human rights but even to democracy out there. We're very distressed that this administration, not unlike the Clinton administration, sought to reestablish military to military ties between our military and their military which had been suspended way back into the '90s because of some particularly egregious abuses by the Indonesian military. Unfortunately just a few months ago Secretary of State Rice used a national security waiver to evade limitations on the mil-mil relationship and we now are in a situation where we have established, reestablished full military relations for the first time in over a decade, notwithstanding the fact that military remains unaccountable for a whole series of abuses and indeed is continuing to commit abuses.

Q: Well do you see establishing these military to military relations in your experience has that helped? In other words, you know, I mean, sort of getting inside the tent, can we work things so that things are better or not?



MCWILLIAMS: That's the argument that's made in this Indonesian case. We argue against that by observing that for many decades the U.S. had a very tight relationship with the Indonesian military. IMET, the International Military Education and Training was available to them. They had all sorts of people here in the United States training and in point of fact during those decades we saw terrible abuses which were uncontrolled. Most recently just in the newspapers today as a matter of fact it's reported that there is now proof that over 183,000 people died in East Timor thanks to Indonesian military actions, that they used napalm, by the way dropped from U.S.-provided aircraft against civilian targets. And this is all now very clear. It was clear, it's been clear for a long time. But that military relationship we had did nothing to reduce the abuses that we saw in the Indonesian military and indeed some of the officers within the Indonesian military with whom we had the closest relationships, who took the most training, spoke the best English and so on were among the worst abusers. So I think the notion, which is argued by the Pentagon, that well, this is the way we can reform them, if we simply get close to them and show them how we do things. Well I'm sorry but that didn't work in the past and I think they're hard put to demonstrate how it's going to work in the future.

Q: Having served there and all, do you have any feel for why the Indonesian military is so bad?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, it's a complex question. The situation is that the military essentially is not under civilian control and never really has been. Seventy percent, roughly 70 percent of its budget comes from offline funding sources. It runs businesses, some of them illegal businesses. It traffics in narcotics, it has illegal logging operations, it's involved in trafficking in people, runs prostitution rings and so on. It extorts money from U.S. and domestic other foreign companies. So it has essentially its own sources of funding and as a consequence is not answerable to the civilian government. It had been answerable to the Suharto dictatorship because that was a military dictatorship. But when I say not answerable to it also is unaccountable as I said before. The justice system in Indonesia is extremely corrupt so that people who are within the military who commit terrible abuses simply aren't brought to the dock for what they've done. As a consequence they are, as I say, a rogue institution and our concern is that the only leverage that really had been available to try to constrain them was that military assistance from the United States was being withheld. And by virtue of the fact that we were withholding full cooperation other nations were holding back on cooperation. Now that that has been released our concern is that we have no leverage left and as a consequence we're concerned that this year of 2006, the first year where they have full military to military relations could be very bad. We met last week, a number of us, with deputy assistant secretary Eric Johns from the East Asian Pacific Bureau and of the NSC (National Security Council) and asked if they were at least going to quietly develop benchmarks against which they would release this assistance. That is to say they would have to meet some goals in terms of reform before we'd actually move forward in specific areas and State and NSC told us very candidly no, we have no benchmarks. So that's particularly worrying.



Q: Okay well, thank you very much.

End of interview